The Paris Review

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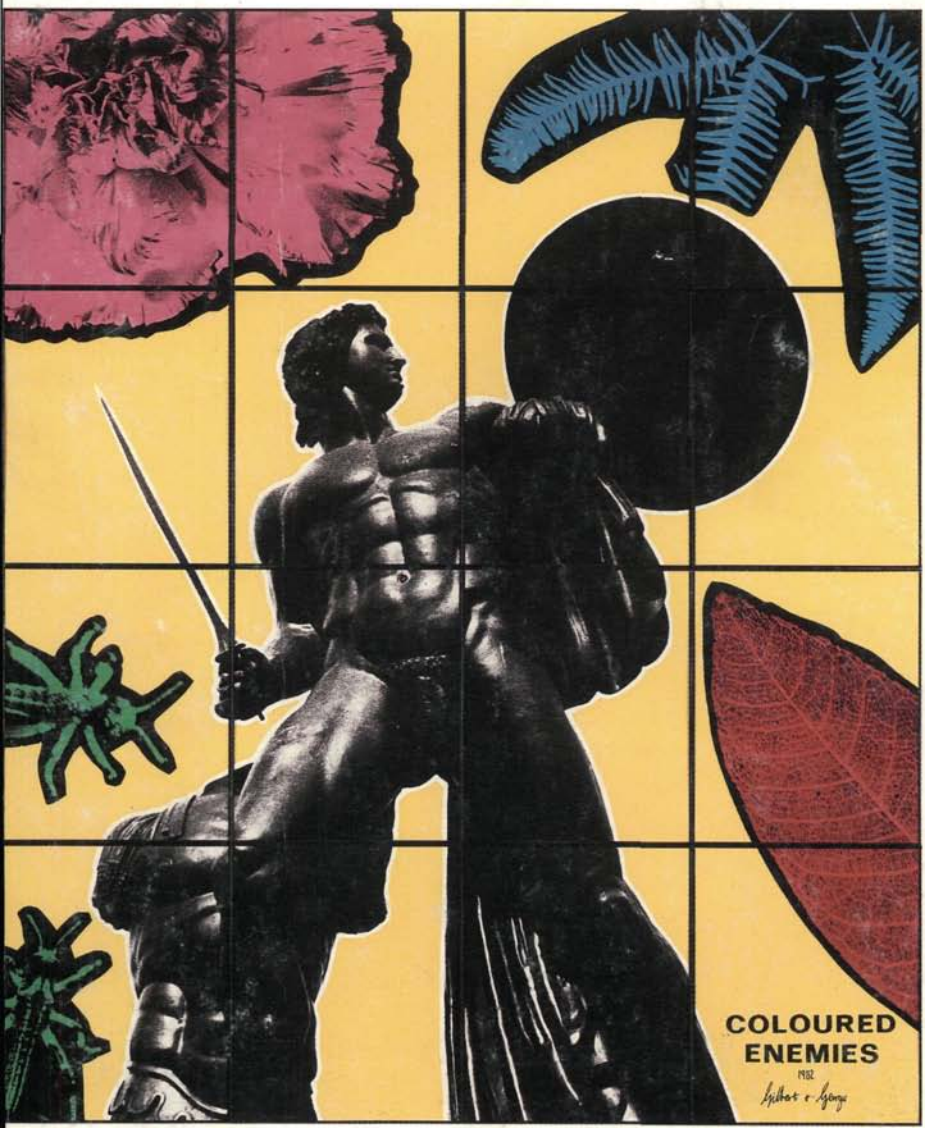

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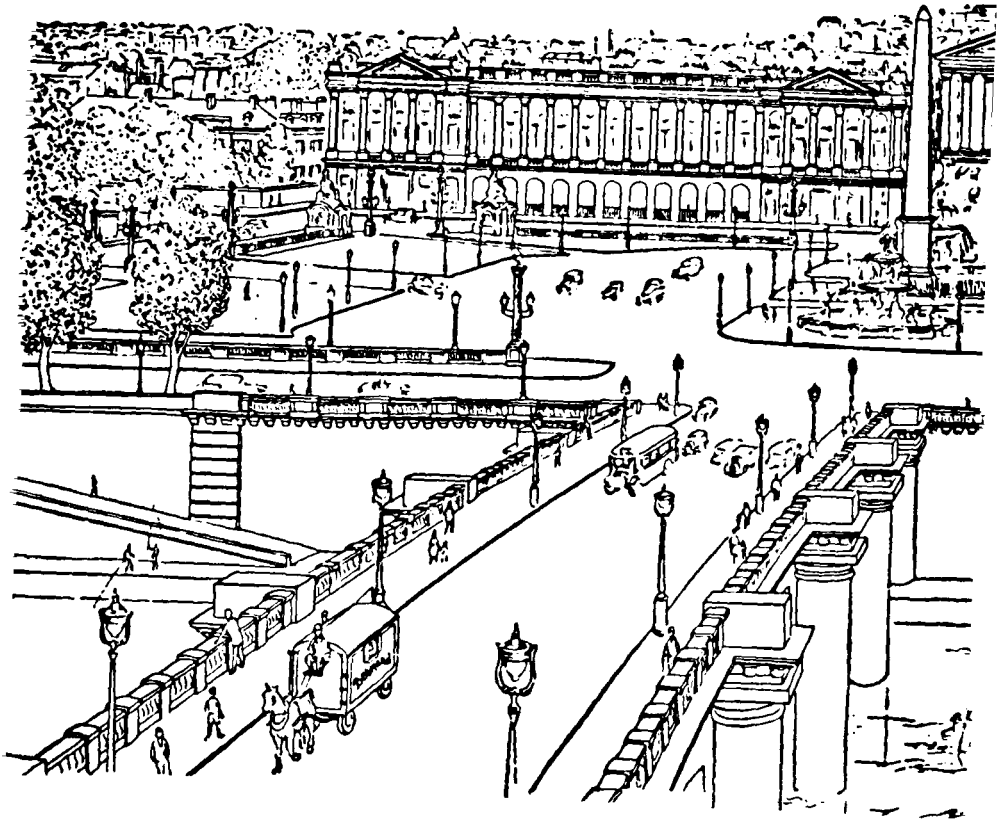

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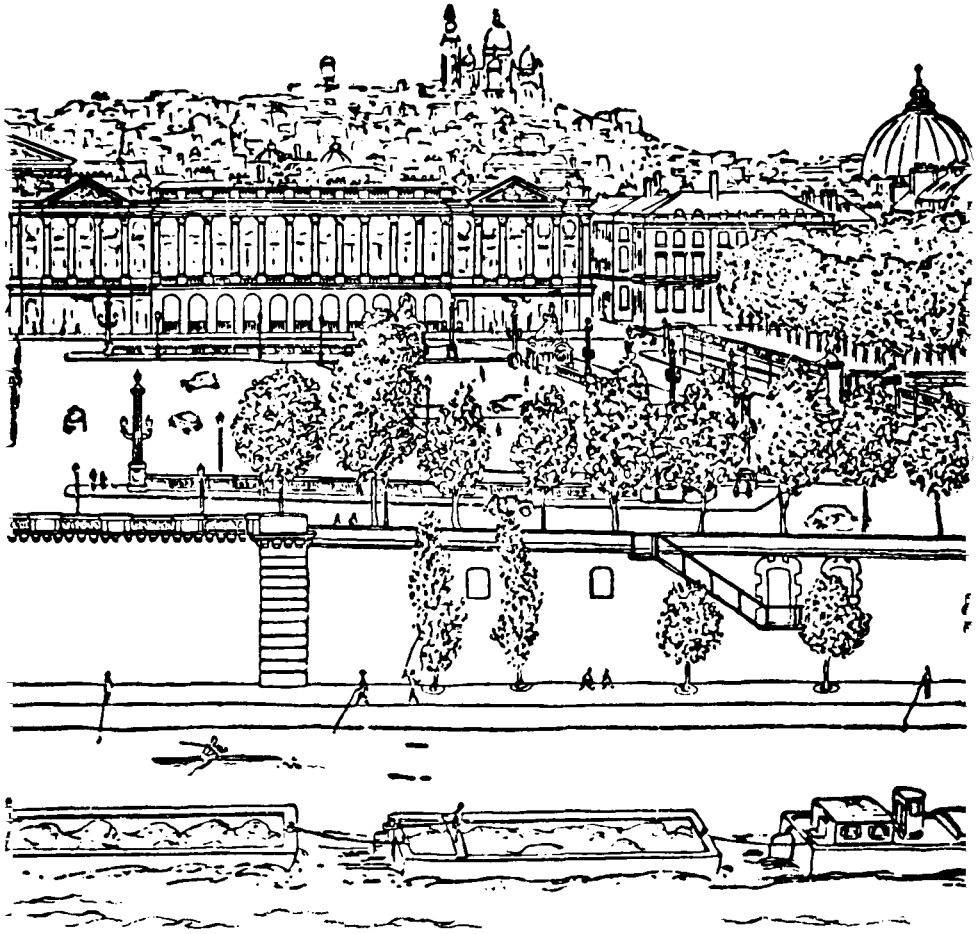

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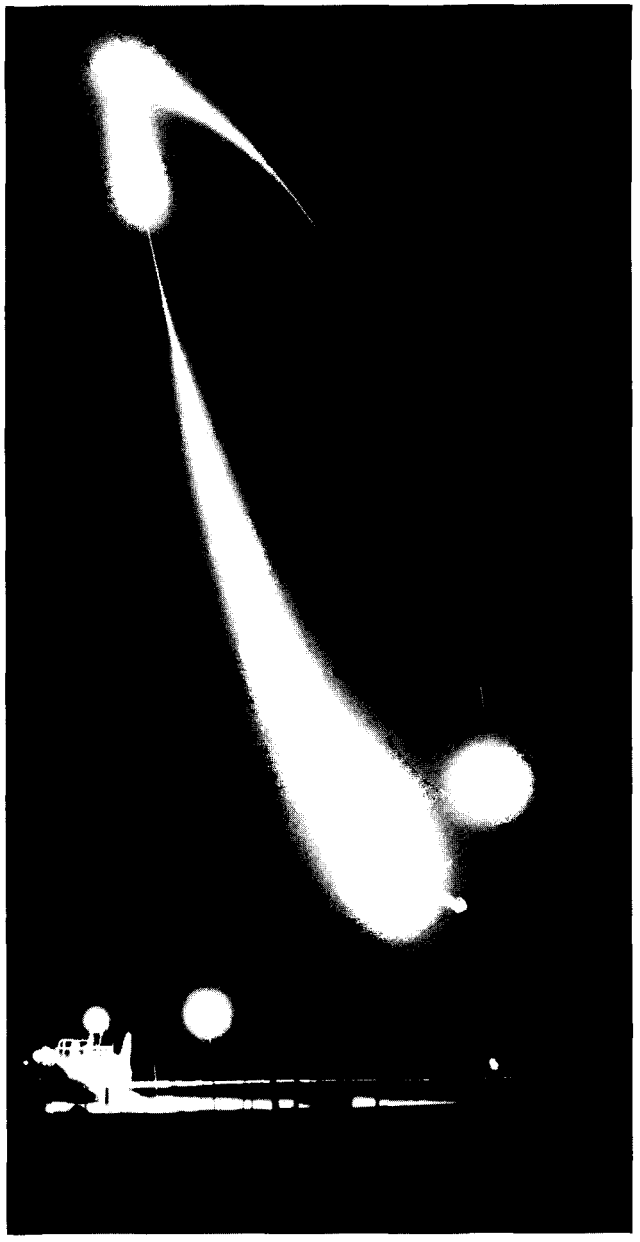

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The Paris Review is pleased to announce the creation of a new prize to be awarded for the best short fiction produced in a 1985 summer writers workshop. The prize will be a thousand dollars and publication of the winning story in a future issue of The Paris Review. The magazine has enlisted the support of the participating workshop directors. Further information should be requested of them. Entries should be addressed to: **1985 Summer Writers Workshop Prize**, The Paris Review, 541 East 72nd St., New York, NY 10021, and should reach this office by September 15.

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The Beet Queen

Louise Erdrich

Long before they planted beets in Argus and built the highways, there was a railroad. Along the track, which crossed the Dakota-Minnesota border and stretched on east to Minneapolis, everything that made the town arrived. All that diminished the town departed by that route too. On a cold spring morning in 1932 the train brought both an addition and a subtraction. They came by freight. By the time they reached Argus their lips were violet and their feet were so numb that, when they jumped out of the boxcar, they stumbled and scraped their palms and knees through the cinders.

The boy was a tall fourteen, hunched with his sudden growth and very pale. His mouth was sweetly curved, his skin fine and girlish. His sister was only eleven years old, but already she was so short and ordinary that it was obvious she would be this way all her life. Her name was as square and practical as the rest of her: Mary. She brushed her coat off and stood in the watery wind. Between the buildings there was only more bare horizon for her to see, and from time to time

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men crossing it. Wheat was the big crop then, and this topsoil was so newly tilled that it hadn't all blown off yet, the way it had in Kansas. In fact, times were generally much better in eastern North Dakota than in most places, which is why Karl and Mary Lavelle had come there on the train. Their mother's sister, Fritzie, lived on the eastern edge of town. She ran a butcher shop with her husband.

The two Lavelles put their hands up their sleeves and started walking. Once they began to move they felt warmer although they'd been traveling all night and the chill had reached in deep. They walked east, down the dirt and planking of the broad main street, reading the signs on each false-front clapboard store they passed, even reading the gilt letters in the window of the brick bank. None of these places was a butcher shop. Abruptly, the stores stopped and a string of houses, weathered gray or peeling gray, with dogs tied to their porch railings, began.

Small trees were planted in the yards of a few of these houses and one tree, weak, a scratch of light against the gray of everything else, tossed in a film of blossoms. Mary trudged solidly forward, hardly glancing at it, but Karl stopped. The tree drew him with its delicate perfume. His cheeks went pink, he stretched his arms out like a sleepwalker, and in one long transfixed motion he floated to the tree and buried his face in the white petals.

Turning to look for Karl, Mary was frightened by how far back he had fallen and how still he was, his face pressed in the flowers. She shouted, but he did not seem to hear her and only stood, strange and stock-still, among the branches. He did not move even when the dog in the yard lunged against its rope and bawled. He did not notice when the door to the house opened and a woman scrambled out. She shouted at Karl too, but he paid her no mind and so she untied her dog. Large and anxious, it flew forward in great bounds. And then, either to protect himself or to seize the blooms, Karl reached out and tore a branch from the tree.

It was such a large branch, from such a small tree, that blight would attack the scar where it was pulled off. The leaves

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would fall away later that summer and the sap would sink into the roots. The next spring, when Mary passed it on some errand, she saw that it bore no blossoms and remembered how, when the dog jumped for Karl, he struck out with the branch and the petals dropped around the dog's fierce outstretched body in a sudden snow. Then he yelled, "Run!" and Mary ran east, toward Aunt Fritzie. But Karl ran back to the boxcar and the train.

* * *

So that's how I came to Argus. I was the girl in the stiff coat. After I ran blind and came to a halt, shocked not to find Karl behind me, I looked up to watch for him and heard the train whistle long and shrill. That was when I realized Karl had jumped back on the same boxcar and was now hunched in straw, watching out the opened door. The only difference would be the fragrant stick blooming in his hand. I saw the train pulled like a string of black beads over the horizon, as I have seen it so many times since. When it was out of sight, I stared down at my feet. I was afraid. It was not that with Karl gone I had no one to protect me, but just the opposite. With no one to protect and look out for, I was weak. Karl was taller than me but spindly, older of course, but fearful. He suffered from fevers that kept him in a stuporous dream state and was sensitive to loud sounds, harsh lights. My mother called him delicate, but I was the opposite. I was the one who begged rotten apples from the grocery store and stole whey from the back stoop of the creamery in Minneapolis, where we were living the winter after my father died.

This story starts then, because before that and without the year 1929, our family would probably have gone on living comfortably and even have prospered on the Minnesota land that Theodor Lavelle broke and plowed and where he brought his bride, Adelaide, to live. But because that farm was lost, bankrupt like so many around it, our family was scattered to chance. After the foreclosure, my father worked as day labor on other farms in Minnesota. I don't even remember where we were living the day that word came. I only remember that my

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mother's hair was plaited in two red crooked braids and that she fell, full length, across the floor at the news. It was a common grain-loading accident, and Theodor Lavelle had smothered in oats. After that we moved to a rooming house in the Cities, where my mother thought that, with her figure and good looks, she could find work in a fashionable store. She didn't know, when we moved, that she was pregnant. In a surprisingly short amount of time we were desperate.

I didn't know how badly off we were until my mother stole six heavy, elaborately molded silver spoons from our landlady, who was kind or at least harbored no grudge against us, and whom my mother counted as a friend. Adelaide gave no explanation for the spoons, but she probably did not know I had discovered them in her pocket. Days later, they were gone and Karl and I owned thick overcoats. Also, our shelf was loaded with green bananas. For several weeks we drank quarts of buttermilk and ate buttered toast with thick jam. It was not long after that, I believe, that the baby was ready to be born.

One afternoon my mother sent us downstairs to the landlady. This woman was stout and so dull that I've forgotten her name although I recall vivid details of all else that happened at that time. It was a cold late-winter afternoon. We stared into the glass-faced cabinet where the silver stirrup cups and painted plates were locked after the theft. The outlines of our faces stared back at us like ghosts. From time to time Karl and I heard someone groan upstairs. It was our mother, of course, but we never let on as much. Once something heavy hit the floor directly above our heads. Both of us looked up at the ceiling and threw out our arms involuntarily, as if to catch it. I don't know what went through Karl's mind, but I thought it was the baby, born heavy as lead, dropping straight through the clouds and my mother's body. Because Adelaide insisted that the child would come from heaven although it was obviously growing inside of her, I had a confused idea of the process of birth. At any rate, no explanation I could dream up accounted for the groans, or for the long scream that tore through the air, turned Karl's face white, and caused him to slump forward in the chair.

I had given up on reviving Karl each time he fainted. By

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that time I trusted that he'd come to by himself, and he always did, looking soft and dazed and somehow refreshed. The most I ever did was support his head until his eyes blinked open. "It's born," he said when he came around, "let's go upstairs."

But as if I knew already that our disaster had been accomplished in that cry, I would not budge. Karl argued and made a case for at least going up the stairs, if not through the actual door, but I sat firm and he had all but given up when the landlady came back downstairs and told us, first, that we now had a baby brother, and, second, that she had found one of her grandmother's silver spoons under the mattress and that she wasn't going to ask how it got there, but would only say we had two weeks to get out.

The woman probably had a good enough heart. She fed us before she sent us upstairs. I suppose she wasn't rich herself, could not be bothered with our problems, and besides that, she felt betrayed by Adelaide. Still, I blame the landlady in some measure for what my mother said that night, in her sleep.

I was sitting in a chair beside Adelaide's bed, in lamp light, holding the baby in a light wool blanket. Karl was curled in a spidery ball at Adelaide's feet. She was sleeping hard, her hair spread wild and bright across the pillows. Her face was sallow and ancient with what she had been through, but after she spoke I had no pity.

"We should let it die," she mumbled. Her lips were pale, frozen in a dream. I would have shaken her awake but the baby was nestled hard against me.

She quieted momentarily, then she turned on her side and gave me a long earnest look.

"We could bury it out back in the lot," she whispered, "that weedy place."

"Mama, wake up," I urged, but she kept speaking.

"I won't have any milk. I'm too thin."

I stopped listening. I looked down at the baby. His face was round, bruised blue, and his eyelids were swollen almost shut. He looked frail, but when he stirred I put my little finger in his mouth, as I had seen women do to quiet their babies, and his suck was eager.

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"He's hungry," I said urgently, "wake up and feed him."

But Adelaide rolled over and turned her face to the wall.

Milk came flooding into Adelaide's breasts, more than the baby could drink at first. She had to feed him. Milk leaked out in dark patches on her pale-blue shirtwaists. She moved heavily, burdened by the ache. She did not completely ignore the baby. She cut her skirts up for diapers, sewed a layette from her nightgown, but at the same time she only grudgingly cared for his basic needs, and often left him to howl. Sometimes he cried such a long time that the landlady came puffing upstairs to see what was wrong. I think she was troubled to see us in such desperation, because she silently brought up food left by the boarders who paid for meals. Nevertheless, she did not change her decision. When the two weeks were up, we still had to move.

Spring was faintly in the air the day we went out looking for a new place. The clouds were high and warm. All of the everyday clothes Adelaide owned had been cut up for the baby, so she had nothing but her fine things, lace and silk, good cashmere. She wore a black coat, a pale green dress trimmed in cream lace, and delicate string gloves. Her beautiful hair was pinned back in a strict knot. We walked down the brick sidewalks looking for signs in windows, for rooming houses of the cheapest kind, barracks, or hotels. We found nothing, and finally sat down to rest on a bench bolted to the side of a store. In those times, the streets of towns were much kindlier. No one minded the destitute gathering strength, taking a load off, discussing their downfall in the world.

"We can't go back to Fritzie," Adelaide said, "I couldn't bear to live with Pete."

"We have nowhere else," I sensibly told her, "unless you sell your heirlooms."

Adelaide gave me a warning look and put her hand to the brooch at her throat. I stopped. She was attached to the few precious treasures she often showed us—the complicated garnet necklace, the onyx mourning brooch, the ring with the good yellow diamond. I supposed that she wouldn't sell them even to save us. Our hardship had beaten her and she was

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weak, but in her weakness she was also stubborn. We sat on the store's bench for perhaps half an hour, then Karl noticed something like music in the air.

"Mama," he begged, "Mama, can we go? It's a fair!"

As always with Karl, she began by saying no, but that was just a formality and both of them knew it. In no time, he had wheedled and charmed her into going.

The Orphan's Picnic, a fair held to benefit the orphans of Saint Jerome's after the long winter, was taking place just a few streets over at the city fairground. We saw the banner blazing cheerful red, stretched across the entrance, bearing the seal of the patron saint of loneliness. Plank booths were set up in the long, brown winter grass. Cowled nuns switched busily between the scapular and holy medal counters, or stood poised behind racks of rosaries, shoeboxes full of holy cards, tiny carved statuets of saints, and common toys. We swept into the excitement, looked over the grab bags, games of chance, displays of candy and religious wares. Adelaide stopped at a secular booth that sold jingling hardware, and pulled a whole dollar from her purse.

"I'll take that," she said to the vendor, pointing. He lifted a pearl-handled jacknife from his case and Mama gave it to Karl. Then she pointed at a bead necklace, silver and gold.

"I don't want it," I said to Adelaide.

Her face reddened, but after a slight hesitation she bought the necklace anyway. Then she had Karl fasten it around her throat. She put the baby in my arms.

"Here, Miss Damp Blanket," she said.

Karl laughed and took her hand. Meandering from booth to booth, we finally came to the grandstand, and at once Karl began to pull her toward the seats, drawn by the excitement. I had to stumble along behind them. Bills littered the ground. Posters were pasted up the sides of trees and the splintery walls. Adelaide picked up one of the smaller papers.

THE GREAT OMAR, it said, AERONAUT EXTRAORDINAIRE. APPEARING HERE AT NOON. Below the words there was a picture of a man—sleek, mustachioed, yellow scarf whipping in a breeze.

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"Please," Karl said, "please!"

And so we joined the gaping crowd.

The plane dipped, rolled, buzzed, glided above us and I was no more impressed than if it had been some sort of insect. I did not crane my neck or gasp, thrilled, like the rest of them. I looked down at the baby and watched his face. He was just emerging from the newborn's endless sleep and from time to time now he stared fathomlessly into my eyes. I stared back. Looking into his face that day, I found a different arrangement of myself—bolder, quick as light, ill-tempered. He frowned at me, unafraid, unaware that he was helpless, only troubled at the loud drone of the biplane as it landed and taxied toward us on the field.

Thinking back now, I can't believe that I had no premonition of what power The Great Omar had over us. I hardly glanced when he jumped from the plane and I did not applaud his sweeping bows and pronouncements. I hardly knew when he offered rides to those who dared. I believe he charged a dollar or two for the privilege. I did not notice. I was hardly prepared for what came next.

"Here!" my mother called, holding her purse up in the sun.

Then without a backwards look, without a word, with no warning and no hesitation, she elbowed through the crowd collected at the base of the grandstand and stepped into the cleared space around the pilot. That was when I looked at The Great Omar for the first time, but, as I was so astonished at my mother, I can hardly recall any detail of his appearance. The general impression he gave was dashing, like his posters. The yellow scarf whipped out and certainly he had some sort of moustache. I believe he wore a grease-stained white sweater, perhaps a loose coverall. He was slender and dark, much smaller in relation to his plane than the poster showed, and older. After he helped my mother into the passenger's cockpit and jumped in behind the controls, he pulled a pair of green goggles down over his face. And then there was a startling, endless moment, as they prepared for the takeoff.

"Clear prop!"

The propeller made a wind. The plane lurched forward,

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lifted over the low trees, gained height. The Great Omar circled the field in a low swoop and I saw my mother's long red crinkly hair spring from its tight knot and float free in an arc that seemed to reach out and tangle around his shoulders.

Karl stared in stricken fascination at the sky, and said nothing as The Great Omar began his stunts and droning passes. I did not watch. Again, I fixed my gaze on the face of my little brother and concentrated on his features, blind to the possibilities of Adelaide's sudden liftoff. I only wanted her to come back down before the plane smashed.

The crowd thinned. People drifted away, but I did not notice. By the time I looked into the sky The Great Omar was flying steadily away from the fairgrounds with my mother. Soon the plane was only a white dot, then it blended into the pale blue sky and vanished.

I shook Karl's arm but he pulled away from me and vaulted to the edge of the grandstand. "Take me!" he screamed, leaning over the rail. He stared at the sky, poised as if he'd throw himself into it.

Satisfaction. That was the first thing I felt after Adelaide flew off. For once she had played no favorites between Karl and me, but left us both. So there was some compensation in what she did. Karl threw his head in his hands and began to sob into his heavy wool sleeves. Only then did I feel frightened.

Below the grandstand, the crowd moved in patternless waves. Over us the clouds spread into a thin sheet that covered the sky like muslin. We watched the dusk collect in the corners of the field. Nuns began to pack away their rosaries and prayer books. Colored lights went on in the little nonreligious booths. Karl slapped his arms, stamped his feet, blew on his fingers. He was more sensitive to cold than I. Huddling around the baby kept me warm.

The baby woke, very hungry, and I was helpless to comfort him. He sucked so hard that my finger was white and puckered, and then he screamed. People gathered around us there. Women held out their arms, but I did not give the baby to any of them. I did not trust them. I did not trust the man who sat down beside me, either, and spoke softly. He was a young

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man with a hard-boned, sad, unshaven face. What I remember most about him was the sadness. He wanted to take the baby back to his wife so she could feed him. She had a new baby of her own, he said, and enough milk for two.

"I am waiting," I said, "for our own mother."

"When is she coming back?" asked the young man.

I could not answer. The sad man waited with open arms. Karl sat mute on one side of me, gazing into the dark sky. Behind and before, large interfering ladies counseled and conferred.

"Give him the baby, dear."

"Don't be stubborn."

"Let him take the baby home."

"No," I said to every order and suggestion. I even kicked hard when one woman tried to take my brother from my arms. They grew discouraged, or simply indifferent after a time, and went off. It was not the ladies who convinced me, finally, but the baby himself. He did not let up screaming. The longer he cried, the longer the sad man sat beside me, the weaker my resistance was, until finally I could barely hold my own tears back.

"I'm coming with you then," I told the young man. "I'll bring the baby back here when he's fed."

"No," cried Karl, coming out of his stupor suddenly, "you can't leave me alone!"

He grabbed my arm so fervently that the baby slipped, and then the young man caught me, as if to help, but instead he scooped the baby to himself.

"I'll take care of him," he said, and turned away.

I tried to wrench from Karl's grip, but like my mother he was strongest when he was weak, and I could not break free. I saw the man walk into the shadows. I heard the baby's wail fade. I finally sat down beside Karl and let the cold sink into me.

One hour passed. Another hour. When the colored lights went out and the moon came up, diffused behind the sheets of clouds, I knew the young man wasn't coming back. And yet, because he looked too sad to do any harm to anyone, I was

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more afraid for Karl and myself. We were the ones who were thoroughly lost. I stood up. Karl stood with me. Without a word we walked down the empty streets to our old rooming house. We had no key but Karl displayed one unexpected talent. He took the thin-bladed knife that Adelaide had given him, and picked the lock.

Once we stood in the cold room, the sudden presence of our mother's clothing dismayed us. The room was filled with the faint perfume of the dried flowers that she scattered in her trunk, the rich scent of the clove-studded orange she hung in the closet and the lavender oil she rubbed into her skin at night. The sweetness of her breath seemed to linger, the rustle of her silk underskirt, the quick sound of her heels. Our longing buried us. We sank down on her bed and cried, wrapped in her quilt, clutching each other. When that was done, however, I acquired a brain of ice.

I washed my face off in the basin, then I roused Karl and told him we were going to Aunt Fritzie's. He acquiesced, suffering again in a dumb lethargy. We ate all there was to eat in the room, two cold pancakes, and packed what we owned in a small cardboard suitcase. Karl carried that. I carried the quilt. The last thing I did was reach far back in my mother's drawer and pull our her small round keepsake box. It was covered in blue velvet and tightly locked.

"We might need to sell these things," I told Karl. He hesitated but then, with a hard look, he took the box.

We slipped out before sunrise and walked to the train station. In the weedy yards there were men who knew each boxcar's destination. We found the car we wanted and climbed in. There was hay in one corner. We spread the quilt over it and rolled up together, curled tight, with our heads on the suitcase and Adelaide's blue velvet box between us in Karl's breast pocket. We clung to the thought of the treasures inside of it.

We spent a day and a night on that train while it switched and braked and rumbled on an agonizingly complex route to Argus. We did not dare jump off for a drink of water or to scavenge food. The one time we did try this the train started up

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so quickly that we were hardly able to catch the side rungs again. We lost our suitcase and the quilt because we took the wrong car, farther back, and that night we did not sleep at all for the cold. Karl was too miserable even to argue with me when I told him it was my turn to hold Adelaide's box. I put it in the bodice of my jumper. It did not keep me warm, but even so, the sparkle of the diamond when I shut my eyes, the patterns of garnets that whirled in the dark air, gave me something. My mind hardened, faceted and gleaming like a magic stone, and I saw my mother clearly.

She was still in the plane, flying close to the pulsing stars, when suddenly Omar noticed that the fuel was getting low. He did not love Adelaide at first sight, or even care what happened to her. He had to save himself. Somehow he had to lighten his load. So he set his controls. He stood up in his cockpit. Then in one sudden motion he plucked my mother out of her seat like a doll and dropped her overboard.

All night she fell through the awful cold. Her coat flapped open and her pale green dress wrapped tightly around her legs. Her red hair flowed straight upward like a flame. She was a candle that gave no warmth. My heart froze. I had no love for her. That is why, by morning, I allowed her to hit the earth.

By the time we saw the sign on the brick station, I was dull again, a block of sullen cold. Still, it hurt when I jumped, scraping my cold knees and the heels of my hands. The pain sharpened me enough to read signs in windows and rack my mind for just where Aunt Fritzie's shop was. It had been years since we visited.

Karl was older, and I probably should not hold myself accountable for losing him too. But I didn't call him. I didn't run after him. I couldn't stand how his face glowed in the blossoms' reflected light, pink and radiant, so like the way he sat beneath our mother's stroking hand.

When I stopped running, I realized I was alone and now more truly lost than any of my family, since all I had done from the first was to try and hold them close while death, panic, chance, and ardor each took them their separate ways.

Hot tears came up suddenly behind my eyes and my ears

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burned. I ached to cry, hard, but I knew that was useless and so I walked. I walked carefully, looking at everything around me, and it was lucky I did this because I'd run past the butcher shop and, suddenly, there it was, set back from the road down a short dirt drive. A white pig was painted on the side, and inside the pig, the lettering "Kozka's Meats". I walked toward it between rows of tiny fir trees. The place looked both shabby and prosperous, as though Fritzie and Pete were too busy with customers to care for outward appearances. I stood on the broad front stoop and noticed everything I could, the way a beggar does. A rack of elk horns was nailed overhead. I walked beneath them.

The entryway was dark, my heart was in my throat. And then, what I saw was quite natural, understandable, although it was not real.

Again, the dog leapt toward Karl and blossoms from his stick fell. Except that they fell around me in the entrance to the store. I smelled the petals melting on my coat, tasted their thin sweetness in my mouth. I had no time to wonder how this could be happening because they disappeared as suddenly as they'd come when I told my name to the man behind the glass counter.

This man, tall and fat with a pale brown moustache and an old blue denim cap on his head, was Uncle Pete. His eyes were round, mild, exactly the same light brown as his hair. His smile was slow, sweet for a butcher, and always hopeful. He did not recognize me even after I told him who I was. Finally his eyes widened and he called out for Fritzie.

"Your sister's girl! She's here!" he shouted down the hall.

I told him I was alone, that I had come in on the boxcar, and he lifted me up in his arms. He carried me back to the kitchen where Aunt Fritzie was frying a sausage for my cousin, the beautiful Sita, who sat at the table and stared at me with narrowed eyes while I tried to tell Fritzie and Pete just how I'd come to walk into their front door out of nowhere.

They stared at me with friendly suspicion, thinking that I'd run away. But when I told them about The Great Omar, and how Adelaide held up her purse, and how Omar helped her into the plane, their faces turned grim.

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"Sita, go polish the glass out front," said Aunt Fritzie. Sita slid unwillingly out of her chair. "Now," Fritzie said. Uncle Pete sat down heavily. The ends of his moustache went into his mouth, he pressed his thumbs together under his chin, and turned to me. "Go on, tell the rest," he said, and so I told all of the rest, and when I had finished I saw that I had also drunk a glass of milk and eaten a sausage. By then I could hardly sit upright. Uncle Pete took me in his strong arms and I remember sagging against him, then nothing. I slept that day and all night and did not wake until the next morning. Sleep robbed me as profoundly as being awake had, for when I finally woke I had no memory of where I was and how I'd got there. I lay still for what seemed like a long while, trying to place the objects in the room.

This was the room where I would sleep for the rest of my childhood, or what passed for childhood anyway, since after that train journey I was not a child. It was a pleasant room, and before me it belonged entirely to cousin Sita. The paneling was warm-stained pine. Most of the space was taken up by a tall oak dresser with fancy curlicues and many drawers. A small sheet of polished tin hung on the door and served as a mirror. Through that door, as I was trying to understand my surroundings, walked Sita herself, tall and perfect with a blond braid that reached to her waist.

"So you're finally awake." She sat down on the edge of my trundle bed and folded her arms over her small new breasts. She was a year older than me. Since I'd seen her last, she had grown suddenly, like Karl, but her growth had not thinned her into an awkward bony creature. She was now a slim female of utter grace.

I realized I was staring too long at her, and then the whole series of events came flooding back and I turned away. Sita grinned. She looked down at me, her strong white teeth shining, and she stroked the blond braid that hung down over one shoulder.

"Where's Auntie Adelaide?" she asked.

I did not answer.

"Where's Auntie Adelaide?" she asked, again. "How come you came here? Where'd she go? Where's Karl?"

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"I don't know."

I suppose I thought the misery of my answer would quiet Sita but that was before I knew her. It only fueled more questions.

"How come Auntie left you alone? Where's Karl? What's this?"

She took the blue velvet box from my pile of clothes and shook it casually next to her ear.

"What's in it?"

For the moment at least, I bested her by snatching the box with an angry swiftness she did not expect. I rolled from the bed, bundled my clothes into my arms, and walked out of the room. The one door open in the hallway was the bathroom, a large smoky room of many uses that soon became my haven since it was the only door I could bolt against my cousin.

Every day for weeks after I arrived in Argus, I woke up thinking I was back on the farm with my mother and father and that none of this had happened. I always managed to believe this until I opened my eyes. Then I saw the dark swirls in the pine and Sita's arm hanging off the bed above me. I smelled the air, peppery and warm from the sausage makers. I heard the rhythmical whine of meat saws, slicers, the rippling beat of fans. Aunt Fritzie was smoking her sharp Viceroys in the bathroom. Uncle Pete was outside feeding the big white German shepherd that was kept in the shop at night to guard the canvas bags of money.

Every morning I got up, put on one of Sita's hand-me-down pink dresses, and went out to the kitchen to wait for Uncle Pete. I cooked breakfast. That I made fried eggs and a good cup of coffee at age eleven was a source of wonder to my aunt and uncle, and an outrage to Sita. That's why I did it every morning, with a finesse that got more casual until it became a habit to have me there.

From the first I made myself essential. I did this because I had to, because I had nothing else to offer. The day after I arrived in Argus and woke up to Sita's calculating smile I also tried to offer what I thought was treasure, the blue velvet box that held Adelaide's heirlooms.

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I did it in as grand a manner as I could, with Sita for a witness and with Pete and Fritzie sitting at the kitchen table. That morning, I walked in with my hair combed wet and laid the box between the two of them. I looked at Sita as I spoke.

"This should pay my way."

Fritzie looked at me. She had my mother's features sharpened one notch past beauty. Her skin was rough and her short curled hair was yellow, bleached pale, not golden. Fritzie's eyes were a swimming, crazy shade of blue that startled customers. She ate heartily, but her constant smoking kept her string-bean thin and sallow.

"You don't have to pay us," said Fritzie, "Pete, tell her. She doesn't have to pay us. Sit down, shut up, and eat."

Fritzie spoke like that, joking and blunt. Pete was slower. "Come. Sit down and forget about the money," he said. "You never know about your mother . . ." he added in an earnest voice that trailed away when he looked at Aunt Fritzie. Things had a way of evaporating under her eyes, vanishing, getting sucked up into the blue heat of her stare. Even Sita had nothing to say.

"I want to give you this," I said. "I insist."

"She insists," exclaimed Aunt Fritzie. Her smile had a rakish flourish because one tooth was chipped in front. "Don't insist," she said. "Eat."

But I would not sit down. I took a knife from the butter plate and started to pry the lock up.

"Here now," said Fritzie. "Pete, help her."

So Pete got up slowly and fetched a screwdriver from the top of the icebox and sat down and jammed the end underneath the lock.

"Let her open it," said Fritzie, when the lock popped up. So Pete pushed the little round box across the table.

"I bet it's empty," Sita said. She took a big chance saying that, but it paid off in spades and aces between us growing up, because I lifted the lid a moment later and what she said was true. There was nothing of value in the box.

Stick pins. A few thick metal buttons off a coat. And a ticket describing the necklace of tiny garnets, pawned for practically nothing in Minneapolis.

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There was silence. Even Fritzie was at a loss. Sita nearly buzzed off her chair in triumph but held her tongue, that is until later, when she would crow. Pete put his hand on his head in deep vexation. I stood quietly, stunned.

What is dark is light and bad news brings slow gain, I told myself. I could see a pattern to all of what happened, a pattern that suggested completion in years to come. The baby was lifted up while my mother was dashed to earth. Karl rode west and I ran east. It is opposites that finally meet.

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Portfolio

Heads and Flowers

Robert Mapplethorpe

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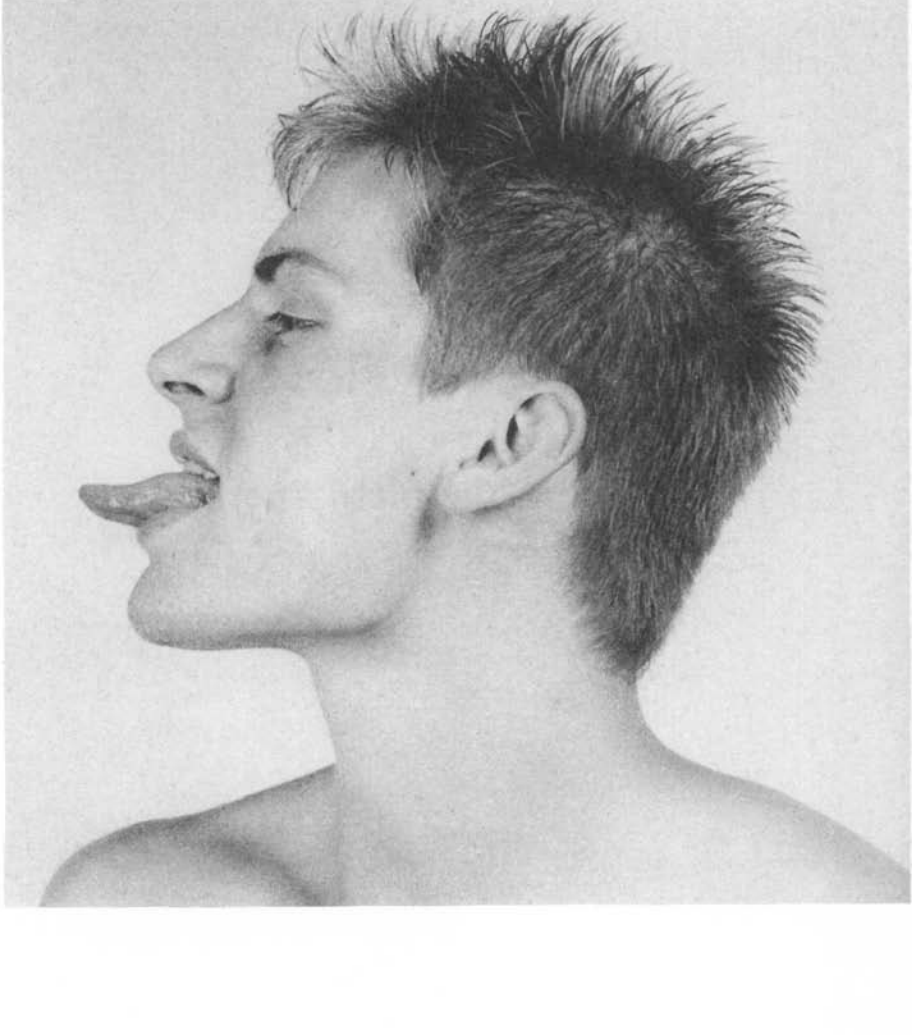

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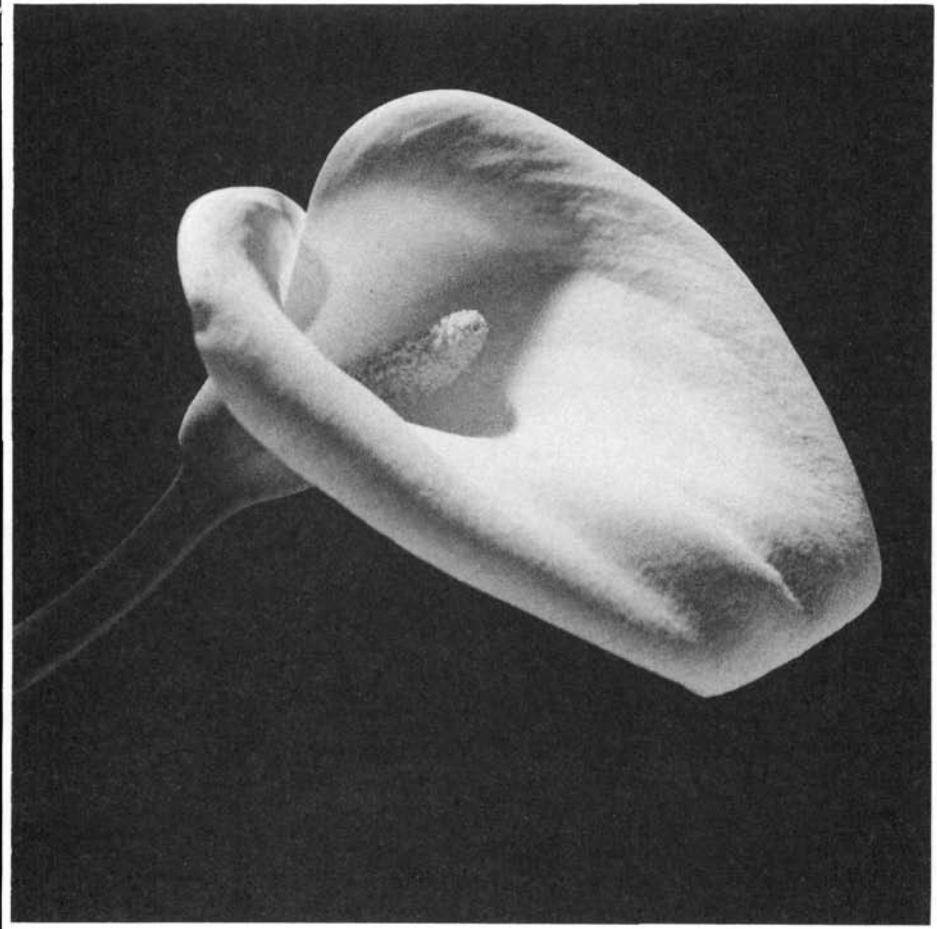

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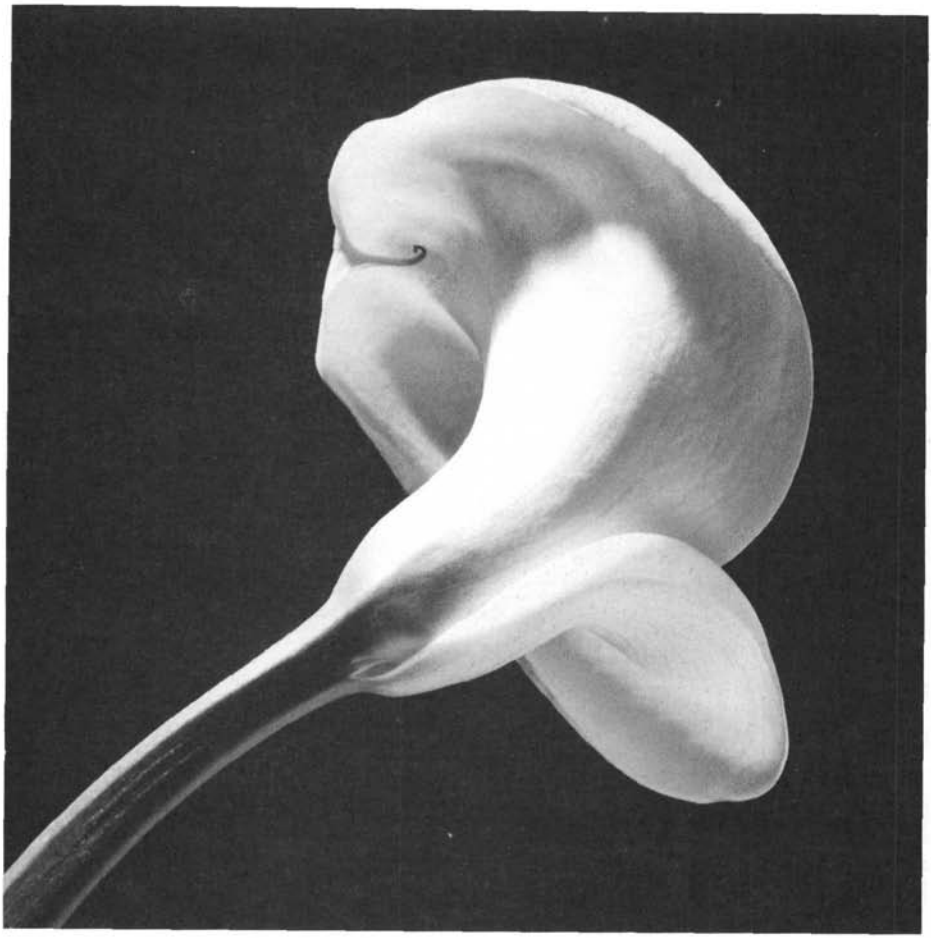

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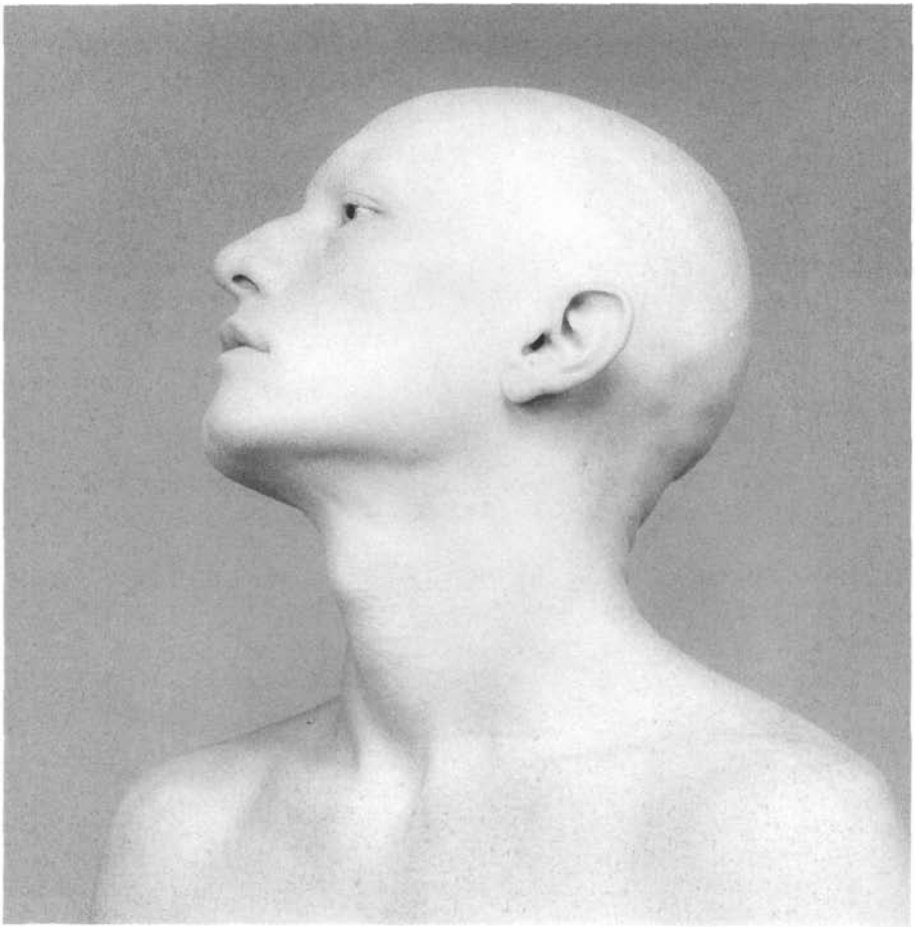

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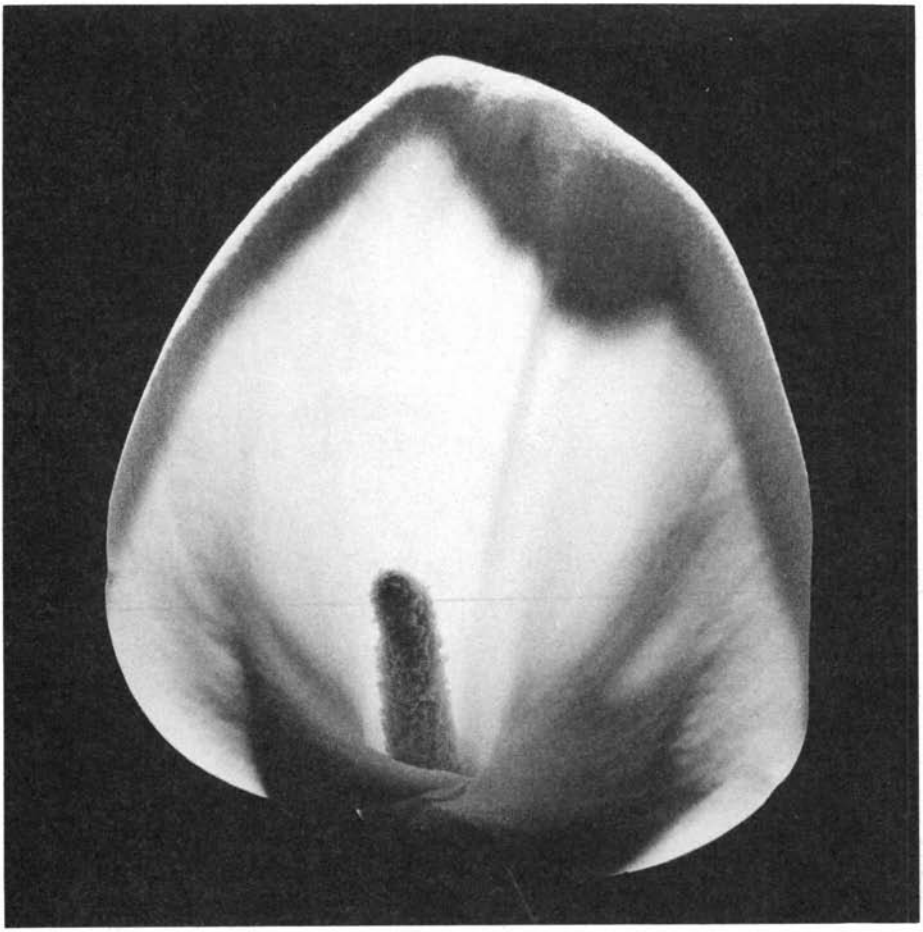

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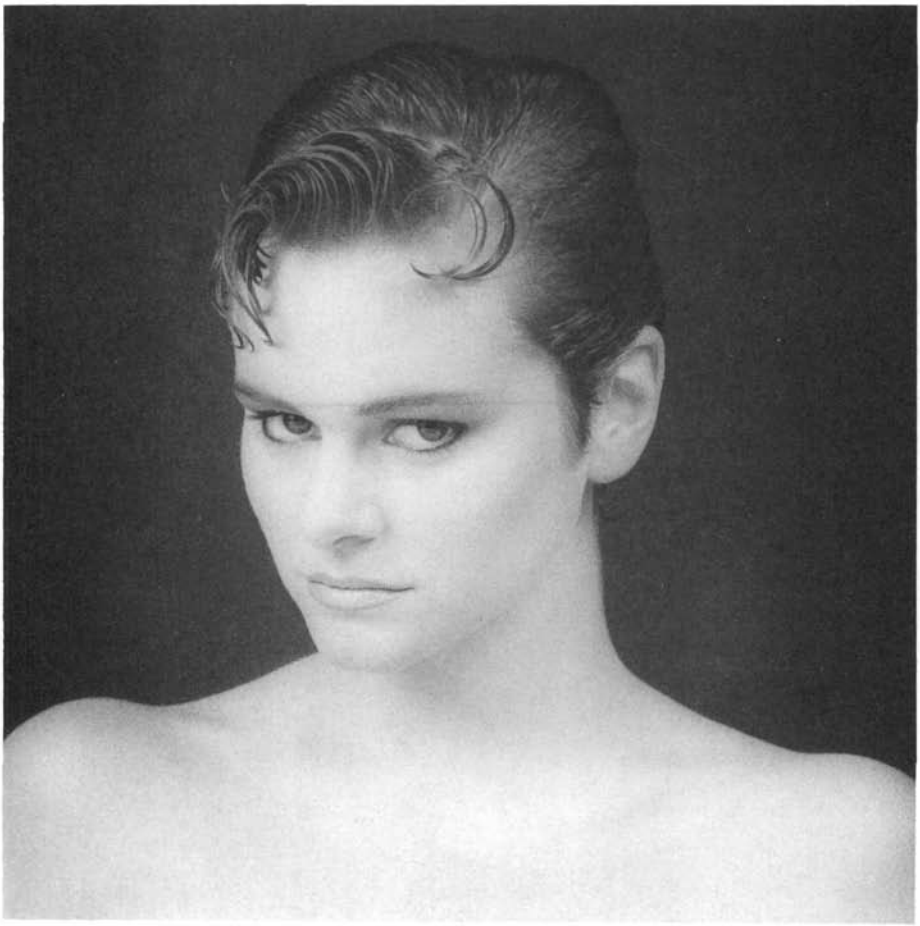

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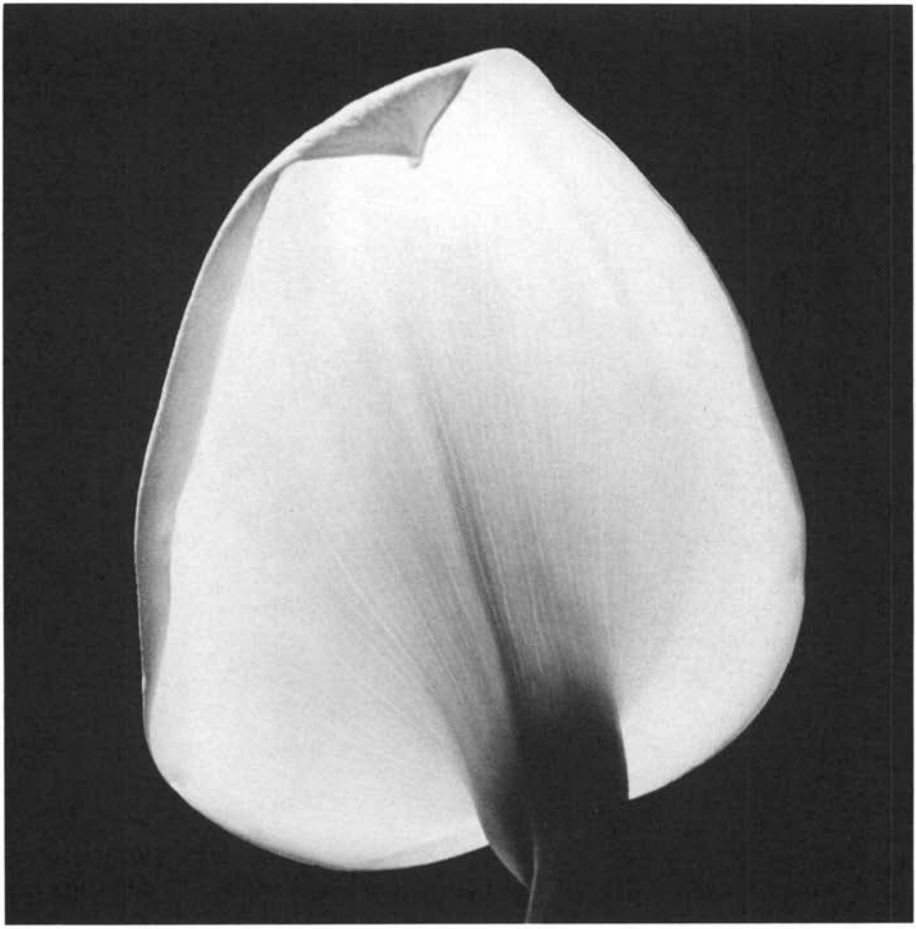

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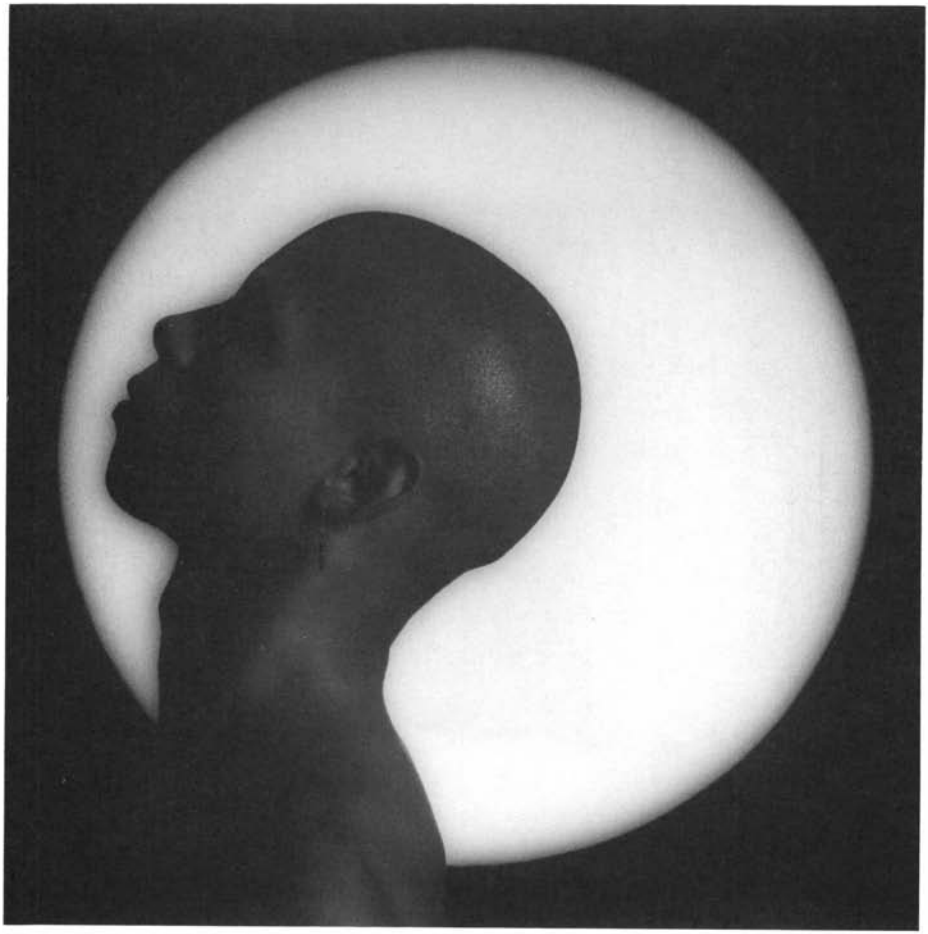

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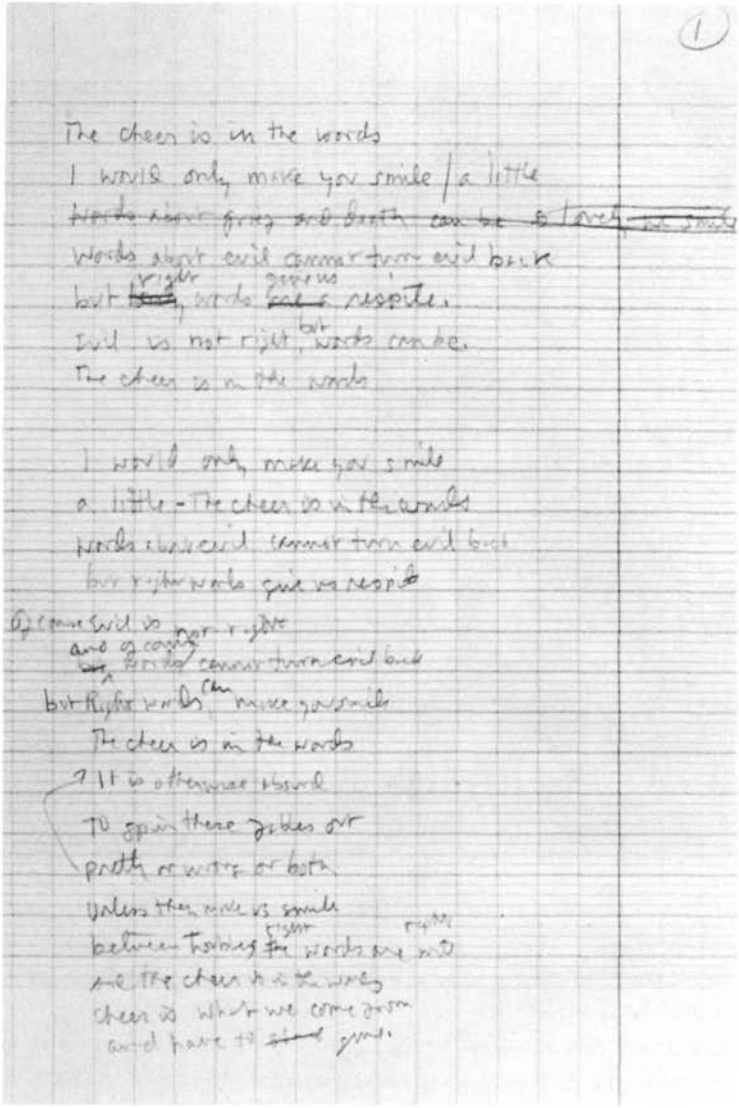

(1)

The cheer is in the words
I would only make you smile / a little
~~Words never grey and death can be so lovely~~
Words about evil cannot turn evil back
but right words genius
~~can~~ respite.
Evil is not right, but words can be.
The cheer is in the words

I would only make you smile
a little - The cheer is in the words
words about evil cannot turn evil back
but right words give us respite
Of course evil is not right
and of course
~~but~~ words cannot turn evil back
but Right words can make you smile
The cheer is in the words
It is otherwise absurd
To spin these jibes out
of both or worse or both.
Unless there were a smile
between hearing the right words and
see the cheer is in the words
cheer is what we come from
and have to give.

A William Meredith manuscript page, first draft of "The Cheer."

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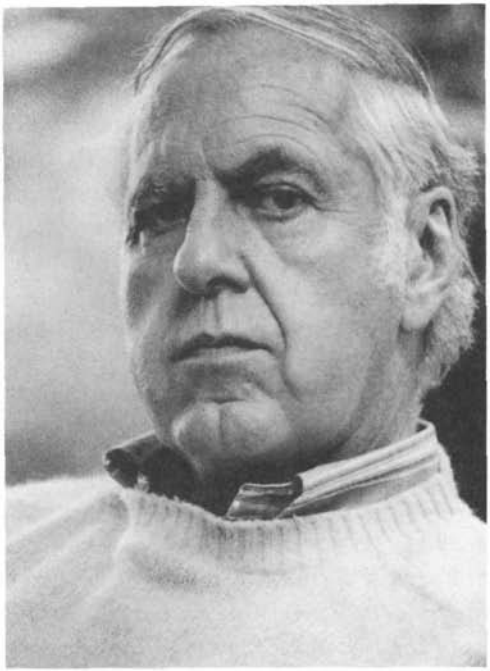

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The Art of Poetry XXXIV
William Meredith

William Meredith lives in Uncasville, Connecticut, just outside of New London, in a rustic nineteenth-century barn that he converted into a house a number of years ago. For many years, he lived about fifty yards away in the large house that stands on the wooded property, but he eventually sold it to friends and moved into a smaller space. He likes to say that he originally bought the property—which overlooks the Thames, the river that figures in so many of his most characteristic poems—in order to keep himself rooted. "I knew that I had found a wonderful place to live and work at Connecticut

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College and I wanted to keep myself from leaving." Although he recently retired from teaching, Meredith has been associated with Connecticut College since 1955, where, over the years, he has clearly been well taken care of by both colleagues and friends.

Meredith was born in New York City in 1919, graduated from Princeton University in 1940, and served as a naval aviator during the Second World War and the Korean conflict. He has published seven books of poems: Love Letter from an Impossible Land *(which was chosen by Archibald MacLeish in 1944 for the Yale Series of Younger Poets),* Ships and Other Figures *(1948),* The Open Sea and Other Poems *(1958),* The Wreck of the Thresher and Other Poems *(1964),* Earth Walk: New and Selected Poems *(1970),* Hazard, the Painter *(1975), and* The Cheer *(1980). He has also translated a volume of Apollinaire's poems and is currently co-editing a book of Bulgarian translations. Since 1964, he has been a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets, and from 1978 to 1980 he was the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. In 1984, he was awarded one of the first Senior Fellowships of the National Endowment of the Arts.*

On the day of the interview, a spring morning in 1983, Meredith was wearing a soft, bone-colored V-neck sweater with an open collar and brown corduroy pants. He looked decidedly nonprofessorial—casual enough to work in the garden, but also turned-out enough to sit and have cocktails with friends. The interview was conducted around a kitchen table in the dining area downstairs. It had poured the previous day, and there was still some evidence of moisture on the stone floor. Meredith seemed a little tired—he had suffered a major heart attack about a year before—but otherwise very much himself. Everything he says is informed by a sharp intelligence, a sly wit, a deep modesty, and a complex optimism. We overheard him tell a close friend on the telephone that morning, "We're in bad health, but high spirits."

INTERVIEWER

You've said that you average about six poems per year. Why so few?

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WILLIAM MEREDITH

Why so many? Ask any reviewer. I remember a particularly wicked review of Edna St. Vincent Millay whose new poems weren't as good as they should have been: "This Millay seems to have gone out of her way to write another book of poems." You're always afraid of that. That could be said, I believe, of certain people's poems. So I wait until the poems seem to be addressed not to "Occupant" but to "William Meredith." And it doesn't happen a lot. I think if I had a great deal more time it would happen more often because I would get immediately to the typewriter. But it might happen eight times a year instead of six—not much more than that. I'll say this because it may be interesting or important: I think it is because poetry and experience should have an exact ratio. Astonishing experience doesn't happen very often. Daily experience is astonishing on a level at which you can write a poem, but astonishing experience would be the experience which is not astonishment of reality but astonishment of insight. It is for me, as a lyric poet, to make poems only out of insights that I encounter. Robert Frost used to say, "How many things have to happen to you before something occurs to you?"

INTERVIEWER

How do you usually start a poem?

MEREDITH

It starts with an insight which gets a few words close to the ground and then the words begin to make specific the insight. Once they start growing the words are seminal—I suppose it's like the bacteria of a growth. I can hardly remember a poem in which the words are not *particular* words, often very bleak, simple words. Once they are put down they are able to focus an idea. I have, I think, only once written a poem—and it's not a very good poem—which came to me literally as a dream that was decodable. It's about an eight or ten line poem and all I could say was, "That's what it said."

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INTERVIEWER

Your poems tend to have a sly, angular way of going at a subject, approaching it from the side rather than directly. Would you say something about that?

MEREDITH

If it's so, it's the nature of the work that a poem is getting at something mysterious, which no amount of staring at straight-on has ever solved, something like death or love or treachery or beauty. And we keep doing this corner-of-the-eye thing. I remember when we were in training to be night fliers in the Navy, I learned, very strangely, that the rods of the eye perceive things at night in the corner of the eye that we can't see straight ahead. That's not a bad metaphor for the vision of art. You don't stare at the mystery, but you *can* see things out of the corner of your eye that you were supposed to see.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that writing a poem is a specific engagement of a mystery?

MEREDITH

I would say exactly that. It is the engagement of a mystery which has forced itself to the point where you feel honor-bound to see this mystery with the brilliance of a vision. Not to solve it, but to see it.

INTERVIEWER

Does this relate to the statement in your poem "In Memory of Robert Frost," that Frost insisted on paying attention "until you at least told him an interesting lie."

MEREDITH

Well, he understood—and I'm afraid his biographer, Lawrence Thompson, does not understand—that at the higher reaches of our experience we don't know the things that we say, but we say that we do. That's the ultimate artistic lie. I tell you

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what I know today in a poem and I don't know it; in the first place it may not be true, and in the second place it may not be what I know tomorrow. Artistic truth is to declare, under torture, what the torturer does not want you to say, not what the torturer does want you to say. You try to tell the truth even though it's uncomfortable for everybody. When the hippies were talking about how the only two things you need to know about life is that you must love one another and not lie, they forgot to tell you that those are the only two really difficult things. We all know that's what we're supposed to do; it's much harder to love people than anybody ever tells you and it's much harder to tell the truth. Poets are professionally committed to telling the truth, and *how* do they tell the truth? They say something that isn't true. This is the slyness of art: if you tell enough lies, you're bound to say something true. I think my work is only as good as it is honest but as a data bank it's full of errors.

INTERVIEWER

Is it fair to characterize *The Cheer* as a work of sly survivals, a resolutely hopeful book?

MEREDITH

A resolutely hopeful book I think it is. The question of survival, in fact the process of survival, is something that either occurs or doesn't occur. It doesn't seem to be something that one deliberately does, but is a product of good instincts and good life. And quite right. Survival, in terms of the poems, has been such that I use them for making my way from one form of commitment to the next. I hope that the poems will lead me more directly to where I'm going and that I'll arrive directed only by instincts, social instincts.

INTERVIEWER

In a memorial poem to John Berryman, "In Loving Memory of the Late Author of Dream Songs," you write that "Morale is what I think about all the time/now, what hopeful men and women can say and do." Why morale?

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MEREDITH

I suppose it seems to me that the priestly function of artists in a society is to administer spiritual vision and that the obvious deficiency of a fragmented and confused society is in confidence. I use morale partly in quotation marks because I first became aware of the word in the military. Muriel Rukeyser pointed out to me that there was a certain General Euleo whose title was "Chief of Morale" and we thought that very funny. I was in the Navy so long that I have to remind myself that's a humorous title. But like General Euleo, I see the need for keeping the morale of the troops high. At one point it was in the papers that Congress had discovered large shipments of dice were being made to the troops overseas, and General Euleo explained that they were parts of a Parcheesi set they had not been able to requisition and that the whole thing would keep morale high. That's like *The Cheer.* My real concern is, in the first place, that we ought not to be solemn and, in the second place, the response to disaster, even cultural disaster, is an impersonal one and the personal obligation is to mental and spiritual health. Of course, it always has been.

INTERVIEWER

In "Hazard's Optimism" you also note that Hazard is "in charge of morale in a morbid time." Is that one of the poet's responsibilities?

MEREDITH

I would suppose so. In a happy time, like Elizabethan England, the poet is probably involved in reminding people that they're all going to come to a bad end. Nowadays, you try to keep people from precipitating their own bad ends.

INTERVIEWER

Playfulness and humor also seem to be an integral part of your poetic stance.

MEREDITH

I first learned about playfulness from W. H. Auden, who

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talks about it all the time. But the example of playfulness I found in Frost was the great attraction of Frost for me. I could see that he played games with words, a sort of Hide and Seek with the reader, and therefore the poems were never as earnest as English teachers said they were. People who are basically humorous are constantly misunderstood in an instructive way. My social career is littered with ill-calculated humor. One doesn't want to say, "I live on the verge of despair and terror and I'm perfectly safe because I'm roped off by humor and good cheer." But sometimes, it's the only way to talk about things. Here is an example: in the Navy, when we were flying, instead of saying, "Take care of yourself," people would say, "Don't crash and burn." I don't know how funny it was, but we thought it was hilarious. Still, there were some people who forgot and didn't take care of themselves and did just that. Humorlessness is a positively morbid quality that certain people have. This is not the same as not being witty, it's not the same as not using humor in a particular instance. It's a solemnity which puts blinders on your awareness of ridicule and absurdity. I'm always suspicious of humorlessness. When you see the pictures of Hitler jumping up and down and laughing with glee over the conquest of France you see a somewhat disoriented human being whose life has had a deficiency of laughter. It's almost a snickering.

INTERVIEWER

Frost has had an enormous impact both on your life and on your work. What do you think in particular that you learned from him?

MEREDITH

When we were in Tucson on a visit once he quarreled with me about something. I guess indeed I quarreled with him on a statement of dignity, and in making up he said, "I brought you along on this trip so you could see a little how I take things." That's also his definition of style: style is how a man takes himself. I think I learned—it's not a very precise answer but it's precisely what I learned on the page and from the person—that that was the way I would like to take myself. I think one

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of the reasons I am so quick to rush to the defense of Frost, who after all was not any nicer than most of us, is that I wouldn't mind being as nice as he was. He took things very generously and magnanimously. His language fascinates me because he lived within his means in language, like an old man. There's never a single word that seems wanting, not a single word that seems to call attention to itself in a pretentious way.

INTERVIEWER

Is this an attitude from life which applies itself to how a man takes his poems?

MEREDITH

One time he said, in connection with his youth and his mother's life, "People used to call us riff-raff. They never knew what riff-raff I am." I take that to be his form of modesty, which is puzzling to people who think he was vain. I think it has to do with his making do with his human and verbal resources, knowing exactly what the best you could do was and doing it.

INTERVIEWER

What are your favorite Frost poems?

MEREDITH

"The Vanishing Red," "Directive," "Spring Pools," "The Birthplace."

INTERVIEWER

In his poem "For John Berryman," Robert Lowell writes, "Really we had the same life,/the generic one/our generation offered." How much do you think of yourself as a poet who belongs to a particular generation?

MEREDITH

I feel myself of that generation because I had the good luck to know those poets. As far as our experience being similar, I think the responses of people like Richard Wilbur or Elizabeth Bishop are different from the responses of Berryman and Lowell,

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and Randall Jarrell's was different still. So that while I'm sure we had basic encounters with history that nobody else had, we took them differently. I believe Lowell is right in associating himself so closely with Berryman. Berryman associated himself closely with Lowell, and both of them with Jarrell, although if you look at Jarrell's work, you wouldn't know that there was any relation. It's one of my theories that Jarrell is probably the most useful poet of the three.

INTERVIEWER

Why?

MEREDITH

His poems are accessible to people who are not trained readers. You have to train yourself to read Berryman, though it's very much worthwhile. I would say to somebody who wants to read Berryman what Nabokov said about Pushkin: "Learning Russian is a small price to pay for reading Pushkin." But every other poem in Jarrell's *Collected Poems* is accessible to somebody who is not a trained reader of poetry. It is just interesting, attractive, and human. Anybody who can read a short story by O. Henry can read a poem by Jarrell.

INTERVIEWER

You've written about Jarrell, "The poems he left behind seem to me to speak in the most compassionate voice of any of his generation." Is compassion the virtue you most prize in Jarrell? What about his acid wit?

MEREDITH

His wit was splendid. I think it's twice splendid because he almost never used it except when appropriate. He used it to detect falsehoods, to deflate intolerable pretension. The reason I think it's less important than compassion is that it is a more common thing in our time. Jarrell wasn't any wittier than Tom Wolfe, say. Also, I lived in mortal fear of him. Why not? He gave a talk in 1962—one of his modest talks where he was assessing fifty years of modern poetry in fifty minutes at the

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Library of Congress—and at the end he said, "And then there is another larger group of poets who, so to speak, came out from under Richard Wilbur's overcoat." It was a reference to Dostoyevsky's famous comment on Gogol, "We all come out from under Gogol's overcoat,"* and it made me feel that I was in that category of poets. I thought then that I would just like to get through life without ever attracting his attention.

INTERVIEWER

When did his poems start to interest you, or influence your work?

MEREDITH

I can date it precisely: it was when I reviewed *The Lost World* in 1964. I read his work very carefully then and with great admiration. Mary Jarrell tells me that he was very pleased with the review and when I saw him with Lowell he treated me with respect, though I can't imagine that my poems interested him very much. But, really, it's the vertebra that I think mine could nearest approach. His and John Crowe Ransom's are the two works most like the works that are my mind's.

INTERVIEWER

Is Ransom one of your models?

MEREDITH

Ransom is a bad model in the sense that he wrote his book of poems and then didn't do much, didn't grow as a poet, didn't have much more to say. I just would like to have forty poems as good as that to call my own, that's what I mean. Also, I would like to have such original insights.

INTERVIEWER

Lowell's poem "Morning after Dining with a Friend" describes a dinner which you had with Lowell near the end of his life. It also refers to your first meeting. How accurate is the poem,

* Dostoyevsky's comment refers to Gogol's story, "The Overcoat."

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and would you talk about your relationship to Lowell both as a person and as a poet?

MEREDITH

The poem, like everything he wrote, is terribly accurate, but the remark about the language of the tribe is changed in mode from declarative to optative. What I actually said was, reading the new batch of poems he gave me that evening, "I feel that with every book you have come a little closer to the language of the tribe." And that's what I say I said in my poem. I have it in his own handwriting that night "to move a little closer to the language of the tribe if we could." So he thought—and he may have been correct—that I was saying: "You've got a long way to go." I wouldn't have the insolence to say that then or now, but what I might have meant was, if you can write this much more accessibly every year you will eventually become as useful as Frost as well as as great as Lowell. That's what I must have had on my mind but I surely didn't urge him to do anything. It's just not my style to urge people to do things. But the account of our meeting is correct as I remember it. I was a member of the Metropolitan Opera Club in those days and we met there—it must have been in 1954—when he was a guest of his friend, Bob Giroux. I had on a uniform because you had to wear either evening clothes or a uniform, and it was easier to put on a uniform. Very soon after that he came to give a lecture at Connecticut College. He was the house guest of his friend Mackie Jarrell (Jarrell's first wife), and I spent the evening with them. In that same winter (1955–1956) the Lowells invited Mackie and me to visit them at their cottage. I remember at the end of the visit he said, "I feel this has been a momentous meeting." We stayed friends through the years. Nobody had any trouble staying friends with Cal. He was an extremely loyal and generous man.

INTERVIEWER

Would you gloss the last lines from your poem "Remembering Robert Lowell": "To punish the bearer of evil tidings/it is our custom to ask his blessing./This you gave. It dawns on each of us separately now/what this entails."

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MEREDITH

To me that line is interesting because it was written under the influence of Lowell. It is not a meritorious line and I'm not sure I'm entitled to tell you what it means any more than I could tell you what it means when I paraphrase a Lowell line. He has the gift for that kind of meaningful inversion of myth. He told us these things about ourselves and we gave assent to the things that he said. And the blessing we asked was: after such knowledge, what forgiveness? And now each of us, reading Lowell, sees what is the appropriate response to that terrible lucid vision of twentieth-century America. He's a much more American poet than anyone ever probably knew. It is ultimately a very American manifestation—think of Henry James or T.S. Eliot—to look over the shoulder of the educated person to see what we can salvage from our past to regain our direction in the twentieth century.

INTERVIEWER

So Lowell is particularly American because of his entanglement with American history?

MEREDITH

Yes, he was very conscious of that. I'm very conscious of it too, but it seems to me that one doesn't talk about it. It annoys me to have been called "aristocratic" when the truth is I have a very deep sense of the commitment of eighteenth-century settlers to this country, all of my ancestors having come to this country before 1800. I don't need to talk about it, what I need to do is find out what's appropriate and do it. Also, my name isn't Lowell. My name is a considerable name: it was on a piece of paper currency in the nineteenth century, a ten-cent fractional note. But this is not the kind of bragging that Lowell did and it's certainly not the kind of bragging I would do; it's only that I'm aware of these things and not ashamed of them. I only wonder what possible usefulness they have—what sense of that kind of history can go into a modest man's modest work.

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INTERVIEWER

John Berryman's thirty-sixth "Dream Song" is dedicated to you. It begins, "The high ones die, die. They die. You look up and who's there?"; and it ends with a parenthetical "(Frost being still around.)" What's your attitude toward the poem? Does it set up a dialectic that's important to you: the doomed poet against the poet as survivor?

MEREDITH

I have a version of "The high ones die" which he wrote out for me at Bread Loaf that says, "The great ones die." He was thinking specifically of the fact that Faulkner and Hemingway had died. He was thinking about mortality and not suicide. He wasn't thinking that the line means "even the high ones die"—rather that it's a bad time to be a high one. "Frost being still around" means the survival of certain high ones is to be thought of, too. The parenthesis probably means to suggest the jeopardy of age. To me the poem was a statement of praise like those other poems he wrote about Frost afterwards, when Frost died. He was saying that we live in a terrifying world where the great poets are being taken from us. It's true that we can't see anybody on the American horizon now who is quite the size of Faulkner or Frost. We are aware of all other kinds of inferiority and this is added to the hazards of the morale. It would be nice if a Robert Frost or a William Faulkner were regularly produced at twenty-year intervals.

INTERVIEWER

Three of the poems in *The Cheer* deal with Berryman, "Dreams of Suicide," "In Loving Memory of the Late Author of Dream Songs," and "John and Anne." Berryman seems to be a key figure to you both as a person and as a poet. Would you talk about your relationship to him?

MEREDITH

He and I were more familiar than I ever felt myself to be with Auden, Frost, or Lowell. I was intimate with Lowell but

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not familiar. We were close friends and the warmth was there, but my mind is not of the size or shape of Lowell's and I was always aware of this. Berryman was wonderful: anything you didn't know that was necessary to follow his argument he would fill in. He didn't expect me to be anything but bright. I have a postcard from him, written when I was doing a piece about the sonnets at his request. I had asked him to identify a source. He wrote me back with the information and the rest of the postcard says, "Really, Meredith, what will you pretend not to know next?" I was familiar with him. You had to accept his undignified behavior in a way that was comfortable for him and you had to do that naturally. Not everybody could do it. I naturally felt that his dignity was never lost. I knew when the alcohol was taking over. I always knew that he was misspeaking himself, rather than saying something wrong. He was saying something in human need. He understood that and relied on it.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think there's been too much emphasis on his tormented biography?

MEREDITH

In the sense that John Haffenden's biography of Berryman and Ian Hamilton's biography of Lowell are not the proportions of the men's lives. Most of the time that I was with Lowell and Berryman, they were happy. They had the happiness of seriously engaged, useful people. That's the impression that I think a biography ought to give. It's our style now that a poet is taken seriously in proportion to his tortures, particularly if his tortures can be blamed on himself. I think it's inappropriate as a value judgement and inappropriate to apply to those two in life. Remember they gave of their company; they gave a great deal. This is partly what I was bitching about in the poem called "The Cheer." We're convinced that you shouldn't smile in public because people are being killed in El Salvador today. I am no less gravely sad about history than the solemn people are. But part of my response is to try to reverse it personally because there is dignity in our response and our response is not self-

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pitying or entirely angry, but a historical one. There is a historical answer to what befalls us and I think the people of good morale have better sense about how to respond.

INTERVIEWER

Does Meredith's Hazard owe anything to Berryman's Henry, the protagonist of *Dream Songs*, beyond the fact that they're both working at a time when, in words you quote from Berryman, "The culture is in late imperial decline"?

MEREDITH

I think it owes something in the sense of the playfulness of the character. I put three of those poems together (they may have appeared in a magazine) and sent them to Berryman and they didn't interest him at all. He was polite about them but I think that all he could see was that anything I could do he had done better. Maybe that clarified for me that I ought to distance myself more in the poem from the diction of Henry. I showed one of the poems to Mackie Jarrell and she said that she didn't like the lines. She didn't say they were from Berryman, but they were conscious attempts to fake his style. I think it does owe something to him in the freedom of colloquial speech, as in his concern about "lay" and "lie," his use of "ceremony-wise." All of which, I suppose, if the poem were to live one hundred years, would have to be glossed: "In those days there was a difference between the verb 'lie' and 'lay'; and in those days it was considered barbarous to use the suffix '-wise.'"

INTERVIEWER

There is a powerful impulse in your work to move beyond the misgivings, grievances, and despair of so many of your contemporaries. Do you see your work as a dialogue or as an alternative to the work of contemporaries like Lowell and Berryman?

MEREDITH

I see it as a dialogue because it relates me to the writers that I admire and know personally. We have different things to say in our poems, we have different visions, so that, in essence, it's

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a dialogue. I don't think their visions are wrong and mine is right. Mine is corrective of one thing and theirs is corrective of another. It's the distortion of art. I distort to see the truth and they distort to see the truth.

INTERVIEWER

And yours is a more optimistic distortion?

MEREDITH

It really is, and I think it comes from having been a closet Christian all my life. I believe in salvation.

INTERVIEWER

Although much of your work is concerned with moral purposes, it does not strike one as being blatantly religious. In fact, the speaker in most of your poems seems to offer the consolation of a well-honed agnosticism. But in a recent poem, "Partial Accounts," you write, "Growing older, I have tottered into the lists/of the religious, tilt." Is this incontrovertible evidence of a conversion?

MEREDITH

No, I would simply say I came out of the closet. My belief is a little clearer to me now and I feel that I ought not to hide it. You know that the best Christian writers don't talk about it as though they were trying to sell you a product. I think of Gerard Manley Hopkins. All the good criticism of Hopkins is written by agnostic Jews and brainwashed nuns who understand that the poetry is true and the truth is what will prevail as a religious example. I say that I'm careful not to practice Christianity conspicuously. But I want to pay attention through the medium of religion. I'm going to give a talk in chapel this month and my theme is going to be that the greatest imaginative accomplishment of the human imagination is atheism. It's the only thing that man has thought up creatively without the help of God. It's a short course but it's a very interesting one. It's sort of like concrete poetry; after you've gotten to the bottom of atheism, you don't have very much left. It's an experiment that

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has run its course. It is my feeling that all the other works of the imagination are derivatives of the creative imagination of a creator. I don't believe in being very doctrinaire and when I'm among the humanists in Bulgaria, what I say is, "Indeed man isn't all the work of God. Indeed there is no reason that he need refer to God." But that's where I see it coming from.

INTERVIEWER

Is it accurate to say that in recent years your work exhibits a greater willingness to speak to public subjects?

MEREDITH

I hope so. I think this had partly to do with my having to think of myself as a public servant again after twenty-five years of not being in public service. I considered myself a public servant when I was in the Navy. Afterwards, I wondered what a public servant does in the role of a poet. When I went to Washington as the poet to the Library of Congress I had a chance to see what could be done with a large audience. Thinking about what happened at the Library of Congress, the chain of artists that one follows there, you see that Americans do have some slight sense of the public function of the poet. It's nice that the Library of Congress has that. It's the branch of Congress that has literary opinions.

INTERVIEWER

In poems like "Politics" and "Nixon's the One" (from *Hazard, The Painter*) and "On Jenkins' Hill" and "A Mild-Spoken Citizen Finally Writes to the White House" (from *The Cheer*), you develop an unusual civic stance for a contemporary poet, a kind of "poet as concerned citizen" approach to the political scene. Does that characterization seem accurate to you? And does this attitude signify a new kind of openness or political engagement in your work?

MEREDITH

I believe that it represents an openness that I've always felt and acted on but never found much way, before this, to talk

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about in poetry. The lyric poem is so often private. For example, my intention in writing "The Wreck of the Thresher" was to write a "public" poem about my feeling of disappointment in the hopes of the United Nations. When I was writing that poem (and I kept all the drafts of it because I wrote it as a sort of dialogue with my friend Charles Shane, who was here that summer without his wife, being the President of the College; I would leave the draft off for him in the morning and he would scribble notes on it and sent it back), I remember seeing it change from a rather pretentious public statement to the very private statement it turned out to be. It occurred to me that this is simply a demonstration of what Auden said in *The Dyer's Hand*, that we don't trust a public voice in poetry today. I would say that my concern about politics is precisely the concern of a Joan Didion or a Denise Levertov but that my stance is very different, so it doesn't appear to be the same. There is a spectrum of political opinion and a spectrum of political involvement. I stand with regard to involvement where those two women stand, but in the political spectrum I'm much more Jeffersonian—I'm nearer the middle.

INTERVIEWER

Your friend, the poet Muriel Rukeyser, had a great sense of the poet's social responsibility.

MEREDITH

Yes. I was never as clear about that as she is. I suppose I'm halfway between Muriel Rukeyser, whose every breath was socially responsible, and James Merrill, who pretends not to read the newspapers. Somewhere in the middle is where most artists belong. I sign a lot of things, I send a lot of funny dollars off. Every four years I have a kind of knee-jerk political life. But I can't compare myself to Muriel in that, except insofar as I pay attention to the things that need to be done in the world. One doesn't miss Vietnam and El Salvador.

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INTERVIEWER

You have several poems dedicated to Rukeyser. In what way was she influential and important to you?

MEREDITH

She was the first poet that I knew personally. I knew her when I was still an undergraduate. She was a very amazing human being and any traces of honesty in my life come from having seen how beautifully honest she was in administering her life and her poetry without any separation—you couldn't get a knife between those two things with her. And my poems are very different from my life, alas. But I understand that that's one of the things you work at when you hope to get better as a poet. The real influence was her human model of what a poet could be. Clearly, our poems have almost nothing in common. But we liked each other's poems, which is an important form of attraction to one's own insufficiency. You like people who can do things you can't do.

INTERVIEWER

You mentioned James Merrill before. One of his chief poetic models is also one of yours: I'm referring to Auden.

MEREDITH

I see more of it in my work than in Merrill's. Of course, the wandering spirit of Wystan Hugh Auden prevails in Merrill's trilogy. That spirit is charming and very genuine: it's clearly coming directly. But in my work there is a lot of Auden that nobody could see except me. I don't know how to tell you what it is. In my mind, my playfulness is a lowbrow American version of his Oxford playfulness. Two of the lines in my poem "About Opera"—"What dancing is to the slightly spastic way/Most of us teeter through our bodily life"—seem Audenesque to me, and I think Auden liked them. I don't know exactly what I mean by Audenesque. It's like Kafka; it's a totally subjective feeling of how you play with language until you get to something spooky.

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INTERVIEWER

It must have been particularly exciting to first encounter Auden's poems.

MEREDITH

It was terribly exciting. It seemed like an appropriate way of handling a new experience of one's own and, oddly enough, what all of us sensed was the Marxism of it. And that's what Auden rejected with the style itself. It was an early mannerism, almost, with him, of such originality and so appropriate for the matter. Of course, as soon as the Marxist matter ceased to concern him the manner went with it. But at the time of my college education, the big events, the El Salvador and Vietnam, were the Scottsboro case and the Spanish War. We were very aware of right and wrong and of the correctness of Marx's diagnosis of why wrong was wrong, if not always of why right was right. The other thing—and this is pointed out very well by Edward Mendelson in his book about Auden and somewhat less well but interestingly by Humphrey Carpenter—is that Auden was trying to disguise his private life in those poems so he had to invent a code. The code language applies both to the underground camaraderie of revolutionaries and the underground camaraderie of homosexuals. I was such an underground homosexual that I didn't even talk to myself, let alone anyone else about it. But I could see that there was something in his language that was appropriate to my intense repressions. I think I picked it up in his short line poems.

INTERVIEWER

Both you and Auden share a deep passion for the opera. How is that passion related to your poetry?

MEREDITH

Not directly at all. I think it might say something about the mystique of form, artifice and form, that we both subscribe to. The preposterous Italian opera seems just as realistic to me as Theodore Dreiser now, in the sense that it describes exactly what I see life to be like. And that's pretty peculiar. An important

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fact about this, which Auden points out, is that we were both fortunate enough not to know anything about opera until we were formed as poets. So it can't have been any influence, but an affinity.

INTERVIEWER

Would you say something about the opera criticism that you wrote for *The Hudson Review?*

MEREDITH

I would say it was lucky that I was never found out.

INTERVIEWER

Did Auden's work change your sense of Yeats's poetry?

MEREDITH

Something changed it. Auden supplanted Yeats as an influence at the time. The opposite side of me from what Frost was nourishing had been nourished by Yeats, and that was the intellectual side. I found Yeats intellectual but I found his poems cerebral. A lot of it wasn't actually sustaining with Yeats. Yeats wasn't a whole lot brighter than Tennyson, the only two poets that I feel myself equal to intellectually. It's a very interesting thing about Auden that he was able to wrestle Yeats to the mat by 1939, and pay these enormous respects to him without any animosity because he could see there was no competition.

INTERVIEWER

One of the Yeats poems that crops up in your work is "The Wild Swans at Coole."

MEREDITH

I like the early minor poems enormously. I think my favorite Yeats poem is "Upon a Dying Lady." It is a very small poem, not in length but in grasp, and it is so elegantly worded.

INTERVIEWER

Is it the high rhetoric that you object to in Yeats's poetry?

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MEREDITH

I don't object to it at all. I find "Sailing to Byzantium" a wonderful piece of music, but it no longer seems to have any model value for me. As I look back, it was only an affectation to think that it ever did. I remember how odd I felt showing Frost my little poem "To a Western Bard" where the last paragraph starts "Or our own great poet's rage/Yeats. . . ." Frost must have wondered why the hell I didn't say Frost. And twice would he have wondered, once because he was greater than Yeats in his own mind—or maybe not, but competitive—and twice because he must have known that Yeats was no place for me to be whoring around.

INTERVIEWER

Throughout your work, you continually exhibit and also prize the civic virtues of modesty and formal restraints. Why do you think these are so important?

MEREDITH

They seem to work for me and I think they're neglected. They're a small part of the picture, but they're a part of the picture that, first of all, isn't talked about very much and, secondly, that I think I know something about.

INTERVIEWER

In the fourteen new poems in *Earth Walk*, in *Hazard, the Painter*, and in *The Cheer*, the style seems a little more casual and idiomatic, roomier and more meditative, less metrically concentrated. Do you feel that after your *Selected Poems*, your work has been evolving a new mode and style?

MEREDITH

I guess I have the poet's antennae for what's going on in the medium. I've adapted the kind of formalism that is mine with the sensibility for formalism that's abroad in the United States. I would say if you want to see how this happens you can look at the work of Berryman or Lowell and see at what point they stopped using initial capitalization and semicolons and excla-

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mation points. My form, insofar as it's subconscious and instinctive, is responsive to the colloquial, by which I mean in this case the colloquial of the genre. What constitutes the very problematic is audibly different from what constituted my speaker's voice. I believe that I will continue to write poems that are shaped like sonnets and villanelles, but I will write them in a way that sounds to me like the modern version.

INTERVIEWER

It sounds like this opening up is a little unwilling.

MEREDITH

It is the opening up of a poet who owes as much responsibility to the tradition as to the new and the novel. In that sense, I'm not willing to modify forms which seem to me very energized still. I want to use them now as they were used then, which is to say, to change them.

INTERVIEWER

In a prefatory note you refer to *Hazard* as a "characterization" and your publisher describes it as "a miniature novel in verse." Is your sequence trying to regain some of the large territory that poetry has lost to prose fiction?

MEREDITH

Rather, I think, an attempt to concentrate on the dramatic virtue of the lyric poem. It comes from contemplating for years Frost's remark, "Everything written is as good as it is dramatic." I felt that many of the experiences that I wanted to comment on would be more interesting if I could give them to somebody else with a different opinion. Take Hazard's problem with his friend's homosexuality: it's the reverse of my problem. I believe in equal rights for heterosexuals. I have a lot of problems with it, and this is a way of getting at them. I was thinking really about, in that relationship, what I must look like to Lowell. Mostly, I'm Hazard in the sequence, but in the poem "Wholesome" I'm Elliott and Lowell is Hazard. But the poet has no character in the sense that he is interchangeable.

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INTERVIEWER

Apollinaire, a poet you've translated particularly well, talks about the long quarrel between tradition and innovation. Is that quarrel germane to your work?

MEREDITH

I'd rather agree with anybody than quarrel, you know. I think I would say, "Guillaume, you're perfectly right." That doesn't help me. I have no quarrel with tradition, as all of my enemies have pointed out. I think there is no point in striving to be modern or original, because I live now and I am unique. Not terribly unique, but God thinks I'm unique, and in that consists my originality. My modernity consists of the dates of birth and death. So that I don't have this battle with tradition. I feel terribly grateful for any insight that tradition gives me as to what we're about. One of the things that poets sometimes forget is that—by their job specification—they are dealing with the most conservative force in culture, that is, language. I believe that my sense of tradition is limited by my ignorance, not by my conservatism. I would like to be more indebted to Spenser but I haven't been able to get through *The Faerie Queene* yet.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think you learned from Apollinaire?

MEREDITH

I learned to lie back more fearlessly on my subconscious. I think the little poem I wrote called "For Guillaume Apollinaire" is an attempt to say how wonderful it was not to be held accountable for a rational organization of the poem, but simply to feel and to say in English, "Honest to God, that's what Apollinaire said." I'll stick up for him even though it would not have come to me naturally. I think I have one of the most constricted imaginations of any good poet of our time and he had the most liberty in imaginations. It was a helpful distortion. Actually, if I had known about this device I would have started to translate poets like Rilke before. Rilke may be the poet to whom I'm most completely insensitive. I can see what he's doing, but

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it doesn't make much sense to me. My dream life is as orderly as my waking life.

INTERVIEWER

Of course, Jarrell was a great Rilkean.

MEREDITH

Lowell was not and Berryman was not. But none of us will say a word against him. One of my favorite stories about this is the story that Charles Rosen tells about Richard Strauss. He was advisor to Mahler's widow, who had set up the notion of a foundation with her husband's money, and she gave it to composers who needed money. They wrote her and told her why they wanted it—you didn't have to explain how many boats you owned or how much booze you consumed. You just said what you wanted the money for. She consulted Strauss about Arnold Schoenberg and Strauss said, "I've heard some of his recent work and for my part, I think you would be better off in Vienna shoveling snow than giving him the money. But we never know what posterity will say, so you had better give it to him." That's the way I feel about Rilke.

INTERVIEWER

Some of the poems in *The Cheer* revolve around a single, central, and somewhat mysterious idea. I'm thinking of poems like "Parents" and "Not Both." Would you say something about how these two poems were written?

MEREDITH

I'd love to tell you the story about "Parents" because it occurred one time after I'd gone to a Thanksgiving dinner where a couple I'm very fond of had three surviving parents. The three parents seemed to me valid, charming, interesting people, about my own age, and to their children they seemed, as parents normally do, embarrassing, stupid, tedious, albeit lovable. I saw my friends suffering and I remembered such suffering. The poem says essentially, "It is in the nature of things that one's own parents are tacky, and this should give you compassion because

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your children will find you tacky." The poem came out of that particular experience. "Not Both" came from the fact that I was entrusted, unfairly, as one is often entrusted, with a secret by someone who then said, "Probably I shouldn't have told you this, because I know that you don't have the character to keep a secret." I thought, okay, that's a dare, I will. I don't have the character to keep a secret and in this one case I will keep a secret and I won't tell it to anyone. The other examples in the poem are unresolved questions about people I know. I don't know whether one is a suicide, I don't know if one was having an incestuous love affair, and not ever knowing that is almost the same as it not ever having happened. Two things can happen and one did, and I don't know which one it is. And then the final thing is Pascal's wager: Somebody knows, or nobody knows, the answer to these questions.

INTERVIEWER

The final line is a comment on that: "One of those two appalling things is true too."

MEREDITH

Some people don't see how I use the word "cheer". I'm cheerful because I'm able to say that, to see that, and live. That's all I'd lose. Those are not the rules that I myself would have chosen. But we accept this wager from God, or not from God, and we don't despair. We assent.

INTERVIEWER

What does it mean to say, as Thoreau does and as you affirm, that things change, but from what they are not to what they are?

MEREDITH

Well, any time people ask me about the difference between the poems in *The Cheer*, formally or in content, from my earlier work, my impulse is to say that I'm more sure of what is in character for me now than when I was thirty-three, and the poems are what is in character for me. I have changed, like Thoreau's aphorism, only by sloughing off that which is not

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in character for me. I would have loved to write like Yeats or Matthew Arnold or Eliot at one time, but in terms of what's shown to me, I don't see in those spectrums, I don't see in that way or in those rhythms; so it was inappropriate, insofar as I imitated those people, to imitate that which is not in character. It was probably in character for me all along to imitate Wordsworth and Frost and Auden.

INTERVIEWER

Theodore Roethke once said, "In spite of all the muck and welter, the dark, the *dreck* of these poems, I count myself among the happy poets." Do you want to be one of the happy poets?

MEREDITH

I would like *The Cheer* to seem like someone who would say, "Yes. Without any reservations, I say yes." I speak about other things with reservations: things that I would want to change, things that I wished hadn't happened, things that we need to do and that we're not doing. But there are people who involuntarily give off an aura of "No," and those seem to be the people I quarrel with. It is inevitable to quarrel with that which you consider damaging in life.

INTERVIEWER

In your introduction to a selection of Shelley's poems you wrote, "Art by its very nature asserts at least two kinds of good—order and delight." Do you still believe that?

MEREDITH

I think I would say it more carefully.

INTERVIEWER

What do you think you'll write next?

MEREDITH

I think that at the rate that I go I will probably continue writing poems that synthesize or readdress some of the things I've seen in terms of the experience of my life. I'm not a quick

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study. I learn the things that are important in life very slowly and often more than once. The only thing the poet has to say is how he got an insight into what everybody already knows. I'll be trying to write poems that are generally accessible and attractive. And more and more I think happiness is the way that my poems go and the way that people take them, taking them as unpretentiously as they're offered. I am very happy about my relationships with students and friends, and I have this wonderful sense that my obligation comes from being privileged to write poems.

—**Edward Hirsch**

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Two Poems by Hugh Seidman

I Dream of You as the Mother and of the Poet of She Who is the Death of Orpheus in Your Dream

Sheen on your hair on the back of your book
jacket. Intellect's steel, perhaps I said.
My friend and teacher until we did not talk,
as I heard you might not to men. Once

I had said I wanted no poems
of false problems. For instance, a boy scolded
by the mother in a dream of the dark for a girl's
kiss of tense, pure joy.

How language betrays; how she keeps lost,
I said, as long as she was these words.
But you wrote of language, the act, to raise the blinds
and purge the dark with sun. The page

so white, the black type luminous
past all logic if we can believe. Your eyes
fierce, or so I imagined. So much light
wanting to be matter. The lioness

on the veldt. The moon, like the sun, lit
by itself. Not posed turned from the lens,
seductive to men, but she from the dream of the Mother
of stone and bronze. As I saw you last

week, after years, a stranger
to me, arthritic, limping like one from war
or accident past Sheridan Square before
the cars in the wind. A suicide's wife,

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a mother of sons, a father's daughter,
feminist, lesbian. You who had dreamed herself
shut from strength—now womanly, strong, a survivor.
I thought of your rage, and its rage for words

to end hurt. Your husband who put
the gun barrel in his mouth. *Isolate*
to the consonants' howls the vowel's dirge. The wrath
of monuments and breath. A false problem

if human contact is endlessly possible,
but, horribly, it had not been solved. He stood,
your poem says, for none but himself. But here
he stands, not to project on the dead

but as death with its silence, that language.
For stubborn against judgment, even your silence,
I would not call to you. Whoever you thought
I was: alone on that street,

yet opened to you, whatever you thought,
as the end of friendship must open us before
the dead.
One must be strong to love solitude,
wrote Pasolini, lover of men,

who said he wrote as if to one
who loved him. But dreamed in hell, he inched: mute,
backwards, unmourned, on the wrong side of the mirror
at the fire and wind. His skull and testicles

crushed by the Roman pimps or a boy.
As if still to say: words cannot say it—
whether or not we desire or believe, or make
them shine for a moment to be the body

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to heal the mind. For which, still,
the typekeys beat the paradox of these life
signs, with what metric the heart repeats, like the hammered
stone or the bronze hurt to the form

by the heat. As if to say, what
shall be said of the problems that are false before
they are the blood, before words must solve them
with the blood to alter the bronze and stone.

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8.1.83

Afternoon's hundreds under the Citicorp on the plat-
form—
feverish underworld over the molten core of the world.

I need money to learn, scrawled on a board,
as if thought literally fed the dwarf violinist's monstrous
head.

But we put a dollar in his cup, grateful for his note
merged then in the heat with the train roar to West
Fourth.

To Krishna's shorn battalion intoning before the cars
to the cymbal rattle on the Avenue of the Americas.

A dozen statues lined up in a box: pink baby to white
skeleton—
on top of which a beast axed a cow with a human face.

Which later you said meant thought's death, as well as
death—
a thought, you smiled, birthday champagne kills best.

Your lustrous glass raised once, forever, to your lips,
though even the earth shall vaporize and the sun fill
space.

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Marilyn Hacker

The Little Robber Girl Gets on in the Wide World

for Julie Fay

She's in a room full of letters, dressed in white
amidst proliferate papers, the exploded lace of sheets.
Her hair froths white, her pale eyes chill, as when I first
saw her. Under white trouser-legs, her long feet

are bare on the stone floor, swollen with heat.
Summer follows summer since the first time
I stood in her crepuscular bedroom
awaiting acknowledgement. The dim chime

of a blue glass clock caught her attention. "I'm
exhausted. Come at six tomorrow. Knock
downstairs. I'll hear you. The heat makes me sick.
Debarrass me of that ridiculous clock."

I put it in my pocket. I left the lock
unlatched. Who knows what I thought I'd do?
I watched from a huge-boled olive tree, her window
a tall candle, while dusk deepened, blue

as my road clothes, and a blade of new
moon sharpened above the limestone bluffs.
"I knew where you were last night. I heard you laugh."
Her sight is dim, but her eyes are sharp enough.

I thought, "Let her be captious, she's a tough
old bird, and, say what you like, she deserves
a bit of courtesy. While I'm here, I won't starve.
You're not a slave when you contract to serve."

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I don't know when it was I lost my nerve.
I was delighted when she seemed to trust
me. I brought the right coins back, her birdscratch list
transformed to fill the larder. Late in the August

heat, shadowed by shutters, we discussed
my future and her past. Sometimes they blended
to one chivalric tale. I understand it
a little better now. She would make splendid

generous gestures in which I pretended
to believe. If it were hers to give,
she'd give it to me—what? her land, her glove
to carry, the bracelet under her sleeve?

Pretended? Why? She didn't want me to leave;
she told me so in several languages,
while I continued to sleep under her trees,
presenting myself mornings, neatly dressed

as I could manage. Each day was a new test.
She sent me out and always I came back
with packages, messages. "You bring me good luck."
I had good luck, I thought. I had a knack

for pleasing. The blue glass clock lived in my rucksack.
Afternoons, I wrote letters, a diligent steward,
weeded the moribund garden while it parched,
stood barefoot on cool tiles while she descended

the tortuous stairway, her gnarled hand extended
toward me. Did I say, she was beautiful;
that youth, in her scintillant pallor, paled
to decorative nursery pastel?

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I felt large, rude and bland, all the more grateful,
though my food and outdoor shelter were all my wages.
Blackberry clumps weighted the brambly hedges.
Sometimes I thought of winter hills' blank pages

scrawled with one bird-track. I forgot my real age—is
that strange?—and that once I was almost always cold.
Brown rabbits and grey water rats ran wild
in the hedges. No animal should be killed

on her land, she said. My nights outdoors were filled
with rustlings, scrabblings. I thought about rats
and rolled down, shivering, into my blankets.
"Womanish," she mocked, when I told her that.

I plunged my face into a fresh-washed sheet
as I lifted it to hang. The odor
of wet linen enveloped unthought-of tears.
I never had done woman's work before

but now I did it daily, over and over.
Sometimes I was insulted, as no servant
who'd take her pay and leave would be. I didn't.
Sometimes I was her twilight confidante,

gallant, or granddaughter, or sycophant.
She liked me best when I was brusque and lewd.
If I was timid, she would call me stupid,
but she'd laugh and correct a misconstrued

sentence I almost halfway understood.
The sun set earlier, but we sat late. Around her
shoulders, I wrapped her black-barred cloak. She was fonder
of talk than fire. Meanwhile the magpies, sometimes the
thunder,

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meanwhile the footpath wound serpentine under
the bushes, tucked in around limestone boulders
above the river-sectioned slopes where wilder
things wandered in the night as I got older,

and she, chameleon, stayed the same, I told her.
Meanwhile the trail debouched on a small road
that led—although I didn't know where it led—
somewhere. From our hill, it was hidden by woods.

After a storm, mist marked the bluffs: it showed.
Meanwhile I scrabbled weeds where no one reaped.
Harvest was windfall. Greengages the wasps
ate splattered tree-roots, or heaped

in their forks, a rats' feast while we slept.
Smashed yellow pears fermented in the grass
the afternoon I thought I'd cut my losses.
With a soiled shirt-sleeve, I rubbed the milk-glass

clock till my face glimmered back from its facets.
I wrapped my four garments around it, rolled
them in my blanket. I stripped her down-drowned bed
of its champagne-silk crewelwork. I sold

that to a market woman. Well, I thought of it, told
myself I ought, might, was entitled to,
as I tied up the rucksack. *Do you know,*
that's probably what she expects of you?

So I turn, part hedges, shield my eyes. I go
up to my haunches in persistent brambles.
Nobody promised me it would be simple.
Nobody's future passes out free samples.

Sunbeams stroked me at a farewell angle
while the watchlight in my mind's eye sought her
shadow smiting rock with an olive mitre:
"You are a thief, and a thief's daughter!"

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Denis Johnson

The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly

James Hampton, 1909, Elloree, S.C.–1964, Washington, D.C.
Custodian, General Services Administration;
Maker of The Throne

I

I dreamed I had been dreaming,
And sadness did descend.
And when from the first dreaming
I woke, I walked behind

The window crossed with smoke and rain
In Washington, D.C.,
The neighbors strangling newspapers
Or watching the T.V.

Down on the rug in undershirts
Like bankrupt criminals.
The street where Revelation
Made James Hampton miserable

Lay wet beyond the glass,
And on it moved streetcorner men
In a steam of crossed-out clues
And pompadours and voodoo and

Sweet Jesus made of ivory;
But when I woke, the headlights
Shone out on Elloree.

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Two endless roads, four endless fields,
And where I woke, the veils
Of rain fell down around a sign:
FRI & SAT JAM W/ THE MEAN

MONSTER MAN & II.
Nobody in the Elloree,
South Carolina, Stop-n-Go,
Nobody in the Sunoco,

Or in all of Elloree, his birthplace, knows
His name. But right outside
Runs Hampton Street, called probably
For the owners of his family.

God, are you there, for I have been
Long on these highways and I've seen
Miami, Treasure Coast, Space Coast,
I have seen where the astronauts burned,

I have looked where the Fathers placed the pale
Orange churches in the sun,
Have passed through Georgia in its green
Eternity of leaves unturned,

But nothing like Elloree.

II

Sam and I drove up from Key West, Florida,
Visited James Hampton's birthplace in South Carolina,
And saw The Throne
At The National Museum of American Art in Washington.
It was in a big room. I couldn't take it all in,
And I was a little frightened.
I left and came back home to Massachusetts.
I'm glad The Throne exists:

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My days are better for it, and I feel
Something that makes me know my life is real
To think he died unknown and without a friend,
But this feeling isn't sorrow. I was his friend
As I looked at and was looked at by the rushing-together parts
Of this vision of someone who was probably insane
Growing brighter and brighter like a forest after a rain,
And if you look at the leaves of a forest,
At its dirt and its heights, the stuttering mystic
Replication, the blithering symmetry,
You'll go crazy, too. If you look at the city
And its spilled wine
And broken glass, its spilled and broken people and hearts,
You'll go crazy. If you stand
In the world you'll go out of your mind.
But it's all right,
What happened to him. I can, now
That he doesn't have to,
Accept it.
I don't believe that Christ, when he claimed
The last will be first, the lost life saved—
When he implied that the deeply abysmal is deeply blessed—
I just can't believe that Christ, when faced
With poor, poor people hoping to become at best
The wives and husbands of a lonely fear,
would have spoken redundantly.
Surely he couldn't have referred to some other time
Or place, when in fact such a place and time
Are unnecessary. We have a time and a place here,
Now, abundantly.

III

He waits forever in front of diagrams
On a blackboard in one of his photographs,

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Labels that make no sense attached
To the radiant, alien things he sketched,
Which aren't objects, but plans.
Of his last dated
Vision he stated:
"This design is proof of the Virgin Mary descending
Into Heaven . . ."
The streetcorner men, the shaken earthlings—
It's easy to imagine his hands
When looking at their hands
Of leather, loving on the necks
Of jugs, sweetly touching the dice and bad checks,
And to see in everything a making
Just like his, an unhinged
Deity in an empty garage
Dying alone in some small consolation.
Photograph me photograph me photo
Graph me in my suit of loneliness,
My tie which I have been
Saving for this occasion,
My shoes of dust, my skin of pollen,
Addressing the empty chair; behind me
The Throne of the Third Heaven
Of the Nations Millennium General Assembly.
i AM ALPHA AND OMEGA THE BEGiNNiNG
AND THE END,
The trash of government buildings,
Faded red cloth,
Jelly glasses and lightbulbs,
Metal (cut from coffee cans),
Upholstery tacks, small nails
And simple sewing pins,
Lightbulbs, cardboard,
Kraft paper, desk blotters,
Gold and aluminum foils,
Neighborhood bums the foil
On their wine bottles,
The Revelation.
And I command you not to fear.

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Three Poems by Peyton Houston

Looking At Tulips

Aware of all this mutability, I ask what does not change:
The longing of the heart to know is what I find myself saying.

One first learned it a long time ago and then it seemed simple to assuage,
But the world gets more complicated and the answers are never any easier.

I look at these colors you have set before me—deep scarlets, water-flecked yellows of tulips:
My eye drinks in the intensity of each but still is unassuaged.

If I should live several lifetimes I still shall not have exhausted the possibilities of even these flowers:
Why should I think of the world that it should be in any way simpler?

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The Rower

Going among the harsh hollows of the water,
The skiff navigates between the crests
And almost is swamped by them. The rower pulls
This oar or that, his head half-turned aside
To catch where some taller wave comes, but yet he takes
Mostly his mark from something on the shore
He comes from. Rain drenches him, the wind
Would pull him right around if he would let it,
But he has skill in this and works his way
And now in smoother channel scoops more evenly
And comes beside a dock and ships his oars,
Takes the lines thrown to him, fastens bow and stern
And heaves himself ashore. He looks behind him
At the long rain squalls and the wrestling water
Almost indifferently, then trudges up the street,
Southwester hat jammed down around his ears,
His waterproof whipping about cumbersome boots,
Until a corner takes him.
I have thought of him
As one who rowing backwards where he goes
Will take his mark from past and any mark will do,
Yet has his skill in exactly getting there
And takes the struggle as not too great a matter
And goes about his errands hardly thinking of it.
I ponder his example. I row in equal waters.

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Sometimes in a House There is No One

Entering, you see before you a stairway,
To the right, the room with blue curtains
Blowing at an open window of summer. To the left,
You pass through a door to what might be the library
But you note that the shelves are all empty except for a china bird and a sea-shell
And a pair of broken binoculars. In the room at the end of the passage
A chair is drawn up by the window. You sit there and look out.
The view is not the same as from the other windows:
You are gazing down a long glade of oaks or some such trees
To a pool with a statue,
A naked figure, an Eros perhaps. It is autumn already.

You call out again to announce your arrival:
As before, there is no answer.
You stand up, look around, find the kitchen.
It is empty, but evidently someone has been there very recently.
A kettle on the stove is still steaming.

You go upstairs looking for who may be there. All the doors are open,
The beds made up with bright coverlets: there are spring flowers in the vases.
But no one is there at all, and outside the snow is beginning.
The glade of trees and the statue are gone: you are looking into a country of mountains

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Where you know someday you must go. You hold up one of
the flowers, smell its scent:
It is very faint, very delicate. It reminds you of something,
What you once knew and forgot, are trying to find again.
You return downstairs and go out. As you stand in the
doorway a motorcar passes
Traveling at excessive speed, but you can glimpse the driver,
Recognize the face. It is your own, of course.

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Sand

Barry Yourgrau

My father comes into my room. "Look," he says. He carefully opens his hands: a luminous, gold-colored butterfly sits in the bowl of his palms, like a light he has carried into the dark room. I prop myself up on a hand in the pillows, gazing in sleepy awe. The butterfly remains still for a while; then it twitches its wings. We watch it flutter in a curving, luminescent course to the window, and then under the sash and out into the night.

We go downstairs and noiselessly out the back door onto the dark lawn. My father points up a tree: a halo flickers around its crown. In its topmost leaves a golden colony hovers. "They'll be there all night," says my father, his voice a whisper. I stand beside him in my pyjamas, spellbound and feeling a strange, tranquil enchantment, as if the night has turned into my bedroom. "Where do they come from?" I ask my father. "From the moon," he says softly. We look at the moon. "At least," he says, "that's what I've always been told."

* * *

"Let's eat," says my father. We go into the dining room.

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Halfway through the meal the phone rings. My father puts down his napkin and pushes back his chair and goes out to answer the phone himself, since he's expecting a call. I seize the opportunity to right an inequality that's been vexing me since we sat down. I pick up my father's plate and hastily scrape what's left on it onto mine, and bolt everything down. My father had given himself by far the larger, tastier portion to start with. He comes back into the room and sees the two empty plates. He looks at them. I sit quietly, trying to appear vacant. He doesn't say anything. He walks behind me. Suddenly he grips me by the back of the collar and heaves me out of my chair, onto the floor.

I lie on the floor, shocked. After a while, I get to my feet, my face burning. I set the chair back upright. I go out of the room into the hallway on trembling legs. I make my way towards the kitchen, and pause in the doorway awkwardly. "Dad, I'm sorry," I tell him, in an unsteady, chastened voice. "I was only joking." He stirs eggs in a bowl. The flame is on under a frying pan. He glances at me. He closes the lid of the egg carton on the counter and takes it over to the refrigerator. "The sooner your mother gets back from her trip, the better," he says.

* * *

I come into the kitchen. My mother screams. Finally she lowers her arm from in front of her face, "What are you doing, are you out of your *mind!*" she demands. I grin at her, in my Bermudas and bare feet. "It's okay," I tell her in a chambered voice, through my father's heavy, muffling lips. "He's taking a nap, he won't care." "What do you mean he won't *care*?" she says. "It's his *head*. For God's sake put it back right now before he wakes up." "No," I tell her, pouting, disappointed that her only response is this remonstration. "I'll put it back in a while." "Not in a while, *now*," she says. She moves her hands as if to take the head from me, but then her hands stammer and withdraw, repulsed by horror. "My *God*," she says, grimacing, wide-eyed. She presses her hands to her face. "Go away! Go away from here!" "Mom," I protest, nonplussed. "Get out of here!" she cries.

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I stalk out of the kitchen. Hurt and surprised I plod heavily up the stairs. I go into my parents' bedroom. I stand at the foot of the bed. My father lies on his back, mercifully unable to snore, one arm slung across his drum-like hairy chest in a pose particular to his sleep. I look at him. Then I back away, stealthily, one step at a time, out the door. On silent bare feet I steal frenetically down the hall, down the front stairs and out the front door. On the street I break into a run but the head sways violently and I slow to a scurrying walk, until I'm in the woods. Then I take my time on the path, brooding, my hands in my Bermudas pockets. I come to the creek and stand balancing on dusty feet on a hot, prominent rock. The midafternoon sun lays heavy, glossy patches on the water and fills the trees with a still, hot, silent glare. A bumble bee drones past, then comes back and hovers inquiringly. I get off the rock and stoop down, bracing the head with one hand, and pick up a pebble. I get back on the rock and fling the pebble at the creek. It makes a ring in the water. Another ring suddenly blooms beside it. I look around at the path. A friend of mine comes out of the trees. "Hi," I say to him. "Hi," he says, in a muffled, confined voice. He stops a few feet from me. "You look funny," he says. "So do you," I tell him. I make room for him on the rock. "Where's your dad?" I ask him. "In the hammock," he says. "Where's yours?" "We don't have a hammock," I tell him. "He's in bed."

Half an hour later there are half a dozen of us standing, great-headed, at the side of the creek.

* * *

My father and I quarrel and he cuffs me and I lose my balance and tumble down the carpeted stairs and bang my head into the foot of the banister.

I lie in bed with my head festooned in bandages. Every evening my father comes into my room with another present for me. A science book, which perhaps I'll read; an instructive game, which I'll certainly never play. Then he wheels me out onto the screen porch and turns on the lamp and reads me a story aloud, which normally he never does. The stories are hoary

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favorites of his from his own childhood, and they bore me terribly. But I love the sound of his voice as he reads, hammy and low and at times awkwardly urgent. Then he puts the book aside. He reaches down and from under the lamp table he brings out our paper hats. He has fashioned these with his own hands from the Sunday paper. He spreads mine wide and carefully seats it on my swaddled head. He fits his own on. Then he turns off the lamp, and in our hats we sit together waiting for the moon, a pale giant, to rise above the woods across the street. He tells me about these woods, as my mother used to when I was still a very little child. "Yes, it's all true . . .," he murmurs, squeezing my hand in his, his great wavering hat nodding in the dark. "The woods are full of all sorts of things—lions, tigers, savage crocodiles . . . And two valiant soldiers," he adds, squeezing my hand. "The young one wounded, the other, who loves him, to nurse him . . ."

* * *

I am taken prisoner by pirates. They put me in irons but release me after I agree to join them. Our ship leaves the coast and enters the muddy reaches of a river. Here the wind falters and then the water becomes too shallow for navigation. We take to rowboats and after an afternoon of arduous pulling, put ashore under trees. The pirate captain says we will eat now; after dark we will move on foot to our raid's destination. Two laughing, stinking types—my "shipmates"—come out of the woods from foraging with a squealing pig in their arms. The one who wears a brass ring in his nose thrusts his cutlass blade against the pig's throat, and laughing all the while, the two of them let the frantic pig wriggle out of their grasp, so that when it lands it's done the work itself of cutting its own throat. The pig rushes briefly in idiotic, posthumous circles in its blood. I turn away, horrified. "Go fetch me the ears," says the captain, grinning at me sadistically as he scratches under his shirt for lice.

The sun sinks. The night is moonless. We move inland. The first mile or so is through dense woods; after much confusion and crashing and cursing, the captain angrily submits and we

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go under the light of a small torch. Then we reach a main road and the torch is doused and we go across. The woods are sparser here. We come to a smaller road and follow it, keeping just off the edge, breathing heavily, weapons clanking in the silence. They have provided me only with a cudgel, apparently not trusting me with a cutlass or pistol. Suddenly I crash into the back of the man ahead of me, who has stopped. He elbows me savagely. It's the brute with the nose ring. "We're here," the captain announces in a fierce whisper.

The dark shape of a mailbox stands beside the entrance of a driveway into the trees. Part of a house is visible, set back on a high lawn. I regard all of this with disbelief. "But this is where my parents live!" I gasp. "What's that?" says the captain, eyeing me over several shoulders. "Nothing," I reply, and I sink back out of his sight. I am in shock. I hear mutterings all around me about a fabulous treasure of vacation slides. We start in a body up the driveway. I can see now the car my mother wrote me they've been trying to sell. No lights show in their window. They're asleep of course, they go to bed early. My heart is sickened, feverish. What could pirates want with my old man's vacation slides? They are good slides, it's true, but worth a raid? I cover my mouth, thinking of what's in store for my poor elderly parents. We reach the lawn. The first pirate goes tramping through my mother's zinnias. Suddenly the cudgel flails in my hands.

I race towards the house. "Mom! Dad!" I scream. "Stop him!" the captain's voice shouts. Explosions roar around me. "Save your ammunition, save your ammunition!" the voice screams. I fling over the welcome mat and find the key and throw open the door and go rushing down the hallway, crying alarm. The lamp is on in my parents' bedroom. I burst in. My father is sitting on the side of the bed in his pyjama bottoms, fitting on his spectacles. His grey hair stands up in sleepy wisps. His false tooth is in the glass on the night table. "What is all that noise and shouting?" he says. "What are you doing here? I thought you were out west communing with nature. Why are you wearing that funny eyepatch?" "There's no time for questions, we have to run," I gasp, pulling him by the arm. "Come

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on!" I cry, then, looking around, I let go. "Oh my God, where's Mom?"

The bedroom door crashes against the wall. The pirates fill the threshold, all black moustaches and yellow teeth, headkerchieves, drawn cutlasses, smoking guns. "Ha!" cries the captain. He comes swaggering into the room in front of his troop. "What's going on?" says my father, rising to his feet. "Who are these awful people, are they friends of yours?" "They're pirates, dad," I muttered unhappily. The captain stops in front of us and raises his cutlass into my face. He sets the point slowly against my chin so I have to tilt my head back. "We're going to hang you by your guts, you mutinous dog," he announces savagely. "This is an outrage!" cries my father. "How dare you? Stop that this instant!" "Dad, don't," I tell him, through clenched teeth, squinting down the length of the blade. "Shut up, greybeard," the captain sneers. He gives a quick vicious prod so that I jerk. "What we want from you," he says, addressing my father but glaring at me, "is to tell us exactly where the slides are." My father gasps. He draws an arm up in front of his once burly but now wizened chest in a pathetic gesture of defiance. "Never!" he cries. "What do you say?" grins the captain. He presses the cutlass slowly so I have to bend my back. "Dad . . ." I plead out of the side of my mouth. There is a long, deadly pause. "Do you think I'll wait all night!" the captain gasps furiously and his jab makes me stagger backwards into the night table, upsetting the tooth glass. "Dad, please—" I whimper. "Stop!" cries my father. His voice breaks. "They're in the closet, over by the secretary." The captain grins lividly. "Ha!" he says. He pulls the cutlass away with a sharp flick of his wrist. I squeal in pain and clap a hand to my chin. I look at the palm: there is a drop of blood on it. The captain swaggers over towards the closet, gesturing with a thumb over his shoulder for someone to guard us. "Don't cry, bag-of-bones, we'll take good care of your treasure for you," he says, and he cackles derisively. He pushes his men out of the way and flings open the closet door.

There is a tremendous choral explosion. The captain rises into the air like a rag doll and sprawls down onto the floor. There is no more front to his body whatsoever. My mother and

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the next-door neighbors, all in nightgowns, step through the smoke firing blunderbusses and muskets. "Now we'll show them!" cries my father. Flintlock pistols blossom in each of his hands. They belch flame. Our guard screams and topples to the floor clutching his face. My father throws the pistols aside. A saber and a dagger take their place. "Cover my back!" he cries. Stupefied, I do what he says and stand behind him. I look around for a weapon, all I can find is the cudgel I brought with me. Furious cries and clangings and explosions around in the room behind my back. Suddenly a pirate bursts in front of me. A brass ring hangs over his frenzied snarl. It's the pig sadist. His berserk one-eye glitters at me. Cursing him, I cower under my cudgel as his cutlass rises high above my head and the spit of his own invectives sprays me. My life flashes before me. The cutlass flashes down with ferocious violence, past me, into the floor where it quivers wildly, sunk on its tip. A hand and forearm are still attached to its handle, gruesomely, all by themselves. The pirate gapes at this spectacle in one-eyed astonishment. Then his astonishment transfers to his chest, where, to a deep gurgling in his throat, the blade of a saber driven by two neuralgic hands sinks full length into his ribs, up to the hilt, then withdraws, covered in blood. He slumps, lifeless and gushing, onto the bed. "Are you alright?" cries my father, the bloody sword in his hands. "Yes, I think so," I gasp, my knees trembling. Then I gasp again, pointing in horror. "Your shoulder!" I cry. "What?" says my father. He peers down his nose at the red stain at the top of his arm. "Ach, it's just a flesh wound," he says. He looks past me and he grins, pale in the face and looking rather foolish with his tooth missing. "Well I think we're about all done for the evening," he says.

Some hours later, when many things have been cleaned up and seen to, the three of us sit alone by ourselves at last in the kitchen. The blackberry cordial my father brings out for special occasions is open on the table. My mother is putting a safety pin into the bandage on his shoulder. I have a Band-Aid on my chin. "So you see we've known a raid was coming for quite some time," my father says. "Everyone in the neighborhood has been very helpful and kind about it, especially the Lewises from

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next door. I must say we didn't expect to see you! But when the time came, we were ready for them." "I'll say you were," I agree. "But you know, there's still one thing in all of this I don't quite understand: why would they want your slides?" "Oh, that," says my father. He shifts in his seat and a grin of debonair self-effacement takes form on his face, and I realize he is trying to evoke the debonair movie heroes of his younger days. His tooth is back in place. "Well I'll resist the obvious temptation of saying they're all 'gems' . . ." he jokes urbanely, pausing to let this *bon mot* sink in. "But in fact," he continues, "for some reason people seem to value them very highly." "Did you know," my mother breaks in, "that next month the library is going to have an exhibit of your father's slides?" "Just prints of them," my father corrects her. But he's beaming proudly. "But at their expense." He leans back in his chair and slings his unbandaged pale arm over the back rest and regards me with a cool, wry twinkle in his eye, his characterization now in full flood. "So you see, Mr. Adventurer-Out-West," he says, the lamplight in his hair, "maybe we do live in a quiet little town here, and perhaps we are getting on a bit in years . . . but we still manage to have our share of excitement. Wouldn't you say?"

* * *

News comes to us of my father. He's lying in the sands. "You must go and recover him," says my mother, "and bring him back for a decent burial." "Yeah, yeah," I tell her. "Right now do you mind if I finish my breakfast?"

After breakfast I go upstairs to my room. Presently my mother comes to find me. "Oh this is appalling," she says. "What are you doing, just lying there?" "I think I have the gout," I tell her. "My big toe is killing me." "Nonsense," she says. "People your age don't have gout." "Why not?" I demand. "Dad had it. I inherited it." "Stop this nonsense!" she cries. Her eyes suddenly fill with tears. "Your poor father lies rotting under a foreign sun and his own flesh and blood won't even lift a finger to find him." I writhe frantically at this remark. "Why should

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I?" I shout, swarming to a sitting position. "There was only one reason he went chasing off to that God-forsaken place. And what was it? I'll tell you what it was: it was because he heard they made terrific stewed fruit! So now I have to disrupt my entire life, I have to risk getting myself killed, because of *his* craving for stewed fruit? I say he can go to hell!" I lounge back, glowering. My mother stares at me with a trembling face. She rushes sobbing out the door. I lie glaring after her; then I smash my fist into the blankets and curse and drag myself out to the head of the stairs.

"I'm sorry," I shout down the staircase, into the stillness. "I'm sorry, I'll go. I can barely read a map and you know how much I hate flying, but I'll go." My mother appears in the kitchen doorway. She looks at me, grim-faced. "Don't you ever raise your voice to me again like you did just now in your room," she says. Her own voice is quiet, deadly. "I said I'm sorry," I tell her, chastened. I take a step down towards her. "I said I'm going." "That's not good enough," she says. "Screaming at me like that." "Mom, I just wanted you to know how I felt," I explain. "And what about how *I* feel!" she shouts. She stamps her foot. "I'm tired of hearing about your feelings, all I heard from your father was his 'feelings'! What about me and my feelings? And what sort of a man are you anyway with your stupid gout and your miserable fear of flying?" "Don't tell me about being a man!" I cry heatedly. "You're a damn fool, that's what you are!" she shouts back, and she wheels and goes through the doorway. I make a livid, obscene gesture after her. Then I wheel myself and stamp back to my room.

I eat lunch alone. Afterwards I leave the house without speaking to her. I go downtown and, after some confusion, locate the consulate I want. A dark, grinning young man in a Hawaiian shirt shows me into a spacious office. A powerful air conditioner drones. "Isn't this heat something?" he drawls pleasantly. "How about a diet soda?" He comes back from a small refrigerator with a can and a straw. "Thanks," I tell him. I wince. "What's wrong?" he says. "It's nothing," I tell him. "A touch of the gout, that's all." He smiles, nodding several times in recognition. "I sympathize," he says. "Sometimes I have

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it so badly in this ear I have to lie all night with a huge ball of cottonwool soaked in paraffin stuffed in it." I look at him. "No, no—*gout*," I tell him quickly. "My big toe. Uric acid. Inflammation of the joint." He looks back at me. "Are you sure that's what is meant by 'gout'?" he says doubtfully. "Oh yes," I tell him, shifting in my seat, trying hard to remain amiable. "But this condition you describe," he continues, examining me askance, "surely this is a condition of older people. Aren't you too young for it?" "It is more common among older people," I allow stiffly. "But it certainly can occur if you're younger." "I see," he says. He considers me in silence. I stare at the floor.

"Well, anyhow," he says. He smiles. "Here is the map you asked for." He pushes it across the desk towards me. He folds his hands in front of him and inclines his head and looks amused. "And what, if I may ask," he says, "could possibly interest you about our enormous, overheated, preposterously sandy country?" "Oh, personal things," I reply, shrugging. I feel his stare on me. "And culinary things," I add. I clear my throat. "For instance, I have heard about your wonderful stewed fruit." His stare becomes puzzled. "Oh *that*," he says finally. He shrugs. "It's not too bad, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing. . . ." Suddenly he looks off to the side and titters. "We always have to warn our visitors, if you'll pardon me, to be very careful of it," he giggles. He grabs his belly in both hands and grimaces violently. "It cleans you out but *good!*" he cries, laughing uproariously. I stare at his gyrations, and a sudden, terrible insight unfurls through my consciousness. "Wait a minute," I ask him, gripping my chair, "you don't think someone could actually—I mean, under the circumstances, out there in the desert—you don't think it could ever be *fatal?*" "*Fatal?*" he says. "Oh no no—well, I suppose if someone were to just eat and eat and eat. But no one could be *that* foolish." "I'm afraid I know someone who could," I mumble.

In a kind of daze I get to my feet. "I must be going now," I tell him. "Thank you. For everything." "Not at all, not at all," he says, rising with me. He holds out his hand and bares his teeth. "Eight-fifty, please," he says. I regard him blankly. "Eight-fifty?" I repeat. "For what? For this map?" "And the diet soda,"

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he says. "The diet soda!" I reply. "How much was the diet soda?" "Two-fifty for the soda," he says. "Six for the map." "But that's highway robbery," I protest, coloring. He shrugs, grinning, holding up empty hands. "This air conditioning," he says. "It's preposterously expensive."

I arrive home fuming. I slam the front door and stamp noisily into the hall, shouting for my mother. There's no answer. Shouting, I stalk into the kitchen. On the table is a note. "I've gone to retrieve your father," it says. "Your supper is in the fridge. Bring it out a while before putting it on the stove. (It may need salt.)" I scream uncontrollably. As I come back out the front door, pain shoots suddenly through my foot so that I hop and stumble idiotically down the front steps. I hurry into the street, gnashing my teeth. I know exactly where she is. At the end of the block I lumber up the short bank of the defunct railroad tracks. I see her ahead, silhouetted against the setting sun, marching along towards the bus stop. A feeling of such utter pathos assaults me that for a moment I just stop where I am. She is dressed for rescue, grotesquely: flopping sun hat, open parasol, my old Boy Scout pack and canteen on her back, her thin calves up to the knee in my hiking socks, which puff out in huge, clownish wads between the straps of her sandals. "Mom!" I shout, hurrying again after her. She stops and slowly turns. She watches my approach. "What on earth do you think you're doing?" I demand. She stares at me and starts to answer, but then her face just wobbles. I put my arms around her. "Mom, Mom . . ." I murmur, patting her shoulder as she weeps against me. "The poor, poor man," she sobs, "all alone for the vultures to pick at." "Mom, it's alright," I soothe her, a great lump swelling in my throat. "I'm going, I told you it'll be alright." After a while, I turn and lead her back slowly across the darkening tracks toward the house.

I put her to bed without bothering about supper. She takes one of my father's sleeping pills and is asleep before I have the door closed. I go up to my room. I turn on the ball game softly and sit with my foot up and the map and my world atlas in my lap. I look at them, musing somberly. Outside, the night is warm and still.

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Towards midnight I wake up suddenly. I'm still in the chair. I rub my eyes. Then I stiffen. I turn off the radio and listen, darkly. A closet door slides open downstairs; clothing hangers rattle. I step over the atlas where it has fallen and go out into the dim hall, and after a pause, go softly down the stairs. The door to the bedroom is slightly ajar, the lamp is on. "Mom," I whisper desperately, and I push the door and peer in. I gasp. "*Dad* . . ." I stammer.

My father looks at me from the closet—an eerily robust version of my father, one with dark-tanned skin, garishly blackened tufts of hair on his almost bald head, huge pitch-black sunglasses. "Yes," he says. "Shhh—your mother!" He gestures with his head towards the bed, where my mother's long-nostrilled, barbiturated nose pokes above the covers. "My God," I whisper, stepping into the room, "we thought you were dead!" "Of course," he says. "I sent the notification myself. And for all intents and purposes, continue to regard it as the case." I stare at him, unable to believe what I'm hearing. A bizarre, alien presence confronts me, in slippers with long, curling toes. "Dad, what's all this about?" I demand. "Why are you taking all these clothes? What's going on?" "I'm a new man, that's what's going on," he says, adding another shirt to an armful of them. An open bag, sumptuously tooled, lies on the floor stuffed with his potbellied underwear. "I feel like a million bucks," he says. "I feel like a kid again. Here—" He shifts the load of shirts to wiggle something out of his breast pocket. He grins lustily, showing splendidly white teeth. "Is that, or is that not, paradise?" he says.

I look at the photograph of him in his new persona, sprawled under a tent awning amidst a heap of grinning houris, all wearing sunglasses and all as plump as he is. I think of a pile of roasted pumpkins. "I just had to come back to get some things to wear," he grins, taking the photo back. "I feel like an idiot in those bedsheets they run around in." He lays the shirts into the bag and reaches into the closet for more. I watch him, stunned. "But what about Mom?" I ask finally. "What about me?" "You're perfectly old enough to take care of yourself," he says. "And as for your mother, she has her pension and her

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memories. And you," he adds. "But you don't seem to understand," I tell him, distraught. "Mom is suffering terribly! She thinks you're decomposing out in the middle of nowhere. She wants me to bring you back for a burial." "I'll send another message," he says. "I'll say I've been cremated. I'll say my ashes have been scattered over the sands." I shake my head, my disbelief turning to pain and disgust. "Dad, this is vile," I tell him miserably. "This is truly perverse." He swings around towards me, glaring. "Don't you sit in judgement of your father, my boy," he says savagely. I flush and swallow. There's a menacing pause. "There are certain things," he says, "about life, about which you are in no posi—" He clutches at the closet door, grimacing. "What's wrong?" I ask. "My gout," he mutters, clenching his teeth. "Damn!" He shakes a stockinged foot. "I have it too," I blurt out. "Nonsense," he snorts, "you're much too young. Anyway," he says, easing the foot back gingerly into its ornate slipper, "why are we arguing! I'm only here for a short while." He grins. "Come, I brought you something, I want you to have a taste of it."

He stoops with a great deal of effort and at last emerges from the depths of the bag with a little clay pot. He takes off the lid and holds the pot out to me, beaming. I peer at it, at the puddle of slimy purple and green and brown it contains. A terrible, pungent odor rises to my nose. "What . . . *stewed fruit*?" I stammer. "Not 'stewed fruit'," he cries. "Ambrosia! It's like nothing you've ever had before." "No, thanks, really," I protest, turning my head away. "I mean I'm not a great stewed fruit fan, and for God's sake, Dad, under the circumstances—" "Oh but you must try some," he insists, pushing the pot at me. "No, but really," I tell him, leaning away and holding up my hands. "And for another thing I've heard it's really dangerous!" "Nonsense, will you just taste a little bit!" he cries, exasperated. I hesitate unhappily; then petulantly I swipe a finger into the pot and poke it into my mouth.

A taste of something pre-civilized shocks me—an intensely coarse sweetness that is part animal fat and hair. I stand swallowing with all my might. "Isn't it out of this world?" says my father, grinning expectantly. I open my mouth as if to answer,

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but the only noise that comes out is a gasp. I double over, clutching at my stomach with both hands. "What's wrong?" my father asks. It feels as if someone were squeezing my intestines with a pair of pliers. Still doubled over, I whirl around and waddle frantically out the door, towards the bathroom.

I huddle on the pot, hanging on to the towel rack for support, sweat standing out on my forehead. Piercing shudders roll through me. I press my face into the towels, groaning. There's a knock on the door. "I have to leave now," says my father's voice. "I'm saying goodbye." "No, Dad, wait," I call out, wincing. "Just a minute." "No, no, I must be going, I have to make my connection," he says through the door. "Goodbye! Take care of your mother." "Dad, please, wait!" I cry, twisting painfully. "Don't desert us like this!" But I can hear the slapping of his footsteps going down the hall; then the door closing.

I come out at last from the bathroom, white-faced and shaky-legged. The hall is empty. I go back into the bedroom. There's no sign of him there either; just some sand from his slippers by the half-empty closet. I look at the tracings of fine grains. Then I look at the bed, where my mother lies, snoring, her frail head showing out of the great rippled mass of the bedclothes. After a long while, I turn off the lamp and go slowly back upstairs.

* * *

My mother comes to me with a jacket. "This was your father's," she says. "What do you think?" I shrug. "I don't know," I tell her. I try it on. The shoulders are too wide and bulky for me. My forearms protrude past the bottoms of the sleeves like peg legs. The tweed is scratchy and smells un-nice. "It's not for me," I tell my mother, taking it off and handing it back to her.

That night I wake up suddenly. My father's ghost stands shimmering beside my bed. "What's the matter, you don't like my coat?" it says. "Dad," I say. I sit up against the pillows and rub my eyes wearily. "It's a fine coat, it just doesn't fit me." "It's a *fabulous* coat," says my father. "You couldn't find a coat made that well anywhere in the world anymore. You should be

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thankful you have even a *chance* to own a coat like that." "Please," I explain, "I love the coat. I was honored to be considered a legatee for it. But I wonder if you've noticed, I happen to be tall and on the thin side while you're short and—and broad." "I was as slim as a reed when I was your age," my father says, drawing himself to full, wavering height. "Slimmer than you are, if you want to know the truth. Of course I always had very broad shoulders." "You looked great, Dad," I agree. "I've seen the photographs. But do you understand what I'm telling you? The sleeves barely reach past my elbows. It looks ridiculous on me." "You could have it altered," he says. "I suppose so," I admit forlornly. "What do you think tailors are for," he says. "Why, any tailor today would give his eyeteeth to work with cloth like that—I'm sure they haven't seen its like in years! Have you felt that tweed, have you run your fingers over it?" "Yes I have," I tell him. "And my neck. It's a great tweed, a true tweed. Like heather and bramble." "I don't know what you mean by 'bramble'," he says, "It's as soft as cashmere against the skin. But 'heather' is very accurate, very *juste*. A tweed that caliber, it's like wearing the earth of the highlands around your shoulders. The Scottish highlands, where tweed comes from." "I know perfectly well where tweed comes from!" I tell him. "In point of fact it's from a part of Scotland which is a bunch of offshore islands, for your information, not highlands." "You don't know what you're talking about," says my father. "Tweed is from Scotland—the highlands." "Look, why are we arguing about this," I tell him. "The point is, I like my clothes to fit. I have several very nice jackets that meet this specification already, so thank you very much all the same." "What, that ridiculous black thing you wear, with the funny collar?" he says. "Please," I tell him. "It's very late, I'm tired, I have to get to sleep, I'm very sorry about the coat. Can we say goodnight?" "Yes, goodnight, goodnight," says my father. "If I were alive, you wouldn't even come near that coat, you would be lucky just to be allowed to *look* at it." "Gee, thanks so much," I tell him, plumping my pillow. "Do you know what it's like being dead and having your precious memories flung back in your face?" he says. "For pity's sake the coat just doesn't fit!" I pro-

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test. "What do you want from me?" "Don't you raise your voice to me," he says. "Don't you think just because I'm gone you can forget your place with me." "But what *do* you want?" I ask him. "Why are you making such a terrible fuss about this?" "I just want to pass on to you what was mine," he says. "You're my son, I want you to have the things that were mine . . . "

I don't know what to say to this. The room falls silent. My father's ghost trembles pathetically in the dimness. "Alright," I mumble finally. "Alright . . . if it means that much to you. Alright. I'll wear it . . . even though—*No*," I blurt out desperately, "I won't, I *won't* wear that itchy, stumpy, evil-smelling thing! I'll accept it and cherish it as a gift from you, but I won't wear it, because it simply doesn't fit, and that's all there is to it. Dad," I say. I push off the covers and get out of bed. "Dad, don't be like that. Where are you going, come back." I go over to the window. "Dad," I call out, over the dark bushes.

"What's all the shouting?"

My mother stands in the doorway in her nightgown. She blinks at me sleepily. "Oh, he got all upset about that stupid tweed coat," I tell her. She looks at me. She looks away and shakes her head, wearily. "Even in the grave," she says, "he's a lunatic." Before she closes the door she says, "Go to bed, go to sleep. I'll give it to the neighbors in the morning."

* * *

I have a bottle in which I keep my father. Fate has decreed that he die and return as a ghostly miniature in a glass container. Fate has decreed further that he do so dressed up as a cavalier, a role in which he liked to fancy himself in life just past. It is not however a lean, lithe, glimmering figure of a cavalier my father cuts. His is portly and solid and squat. But he is properly equipped with a great, opulently feathered hat on his head; a soft spray of ruffles under his double chin; lacy, lampshade cuffs at the ends of puffed sleeves; an embroidered sash diagonally over his girth, from which wobbles the deep, bowled guard of his rapier; suede boots that struggle, rumpled, up to his mid-thigh. Spurs clank faintly when he walks.

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The bottle itself is furnished simply, to my father's needs. It holds a bed, a carpet, a couple of chairs, and a table at which my father spends most days fittingly at work on his memoirs. He looks sober and substantial and squirelike as he scratches away with his quill, his inkpot open on one side of the pages, his great hat carefully set down on the other.

Once a week, on Sundays, he makes a practice of reading aloud his progress, in a tiny, orotund voice. These are not pleasant times for me. Sometimes I can't restrain myself from breaking into his declamations to let him know what I think: that his language is ostentatious, his tone cornball and melodramatic, his selection of facts preposterously self-serving. Naturally I don't use these exact words, but even so my father is violently insulted. He draws himself erect in his finery to dismiss my opinion out of hand. I am callow, I am uninformed; I know, for all intents and purposes, nothing about anything. Haughtily my father flaunts his seniority, the numerous achievements of his lifetime. "You should listen," he concludes, "and perhaps learn something for a change." "Perhaps, perhaps," I mutter, shifting in my seat, as his piping drone resumes.

Then there are days when memoirs are not the issue. A black mood descends on my father. He slumps in his chair in sumptuous, velvety gloom. His splendid hat lies upside-down on its feather on the floor. The deckled pages of his manuscript are scattered over the carpet, useless. My father drinks from a flagon and rails against his death and his imprisonment as a homunculus in a knick-knack. His hair is tangled, his little eyes are red, drunk, obsessed. He pleads with me suddenly to pull the cork from the bottle, to release him from captivity. But I don't think this is a good idea, as I try to explain. Besides, I don't see how he could ever hope to fit through the neck of the bottle. He curses me for this. He seizes his rapier from the other chair and thrusts bellowing at the confines of the bottle. Again and again the glinting needle of his sword buckles against the glass walls. With a howl he heaves the rapier from him and tramples his hat on his way to the bed, where he sprawls in agony, his teeth sunk gnawing into his wrist, the tears coursing down his cheeks.

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When my father's exhibitions reach this piteous stage, I take the bottle down from its wooden cradle on the mantle. I hurry with it into the bathroom. I fill the tub with water and I set the bottle into it. The gentle undulations of the surface exert a calming influence on my father's anguish. His writhing begins to subside; his sobbing diminishes. I stir the water quietly with my fingers. At last my father's hands slacken and fall away; his breathing changes. His room bobs placidly. I listen for it to fill with vinous snores. My father's suede is scuffed, his velvet bruised, his lace torn in places; but at last, he sleeps. Gingerly I lift the bottle out of the tub and dry it with a towel. Tenderness and irony mingle in me equally at these moments. I carry my little, sodden, miserable father back into the living room. Without jostling, I lift him and gently as I can I set him back, snoring, onto the wooden struts of his cradle.

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NOTICE: The Art of Revelry

At some stage this spring *The Paris Review* hopes to have its seventh spring revel to raise funds for the magazine. It has been many years since the *Review* held its last fund-raiser (on a decrepit side-wheeler steamer moored at the South Street Seaport in New York)—mostly because the occasions, although as many as a thousand revelers have attended, have not made enough money to substantiate the considerable effort that has gone into staging them. At the fifth revel, for example, which was held in 1969 on the grounds of an abandoned church on Welfare Island (now Roosevelt Island), two pianos placed out in a grove of trees were destroyed in a late night rainstorm; almost all the profits from the revel were paid to a piano rental company. The final tally showed that the proceeds turned over to the magazine amounted to fourteen dollars.

It has always been a tradition to use a considerable amount of ingenuity and imagination to dress up the occasion to make it memorable for those who come. This spring the intent is to have the function in a New York nightclub discotheque called Area. The place is distinguished from its many rivals in the city by a number of features. First of all, throughout the club are a number of vitrines or diorama windows set into the walls of a maze of corridors, so that in the gloom one often has the impression of wandering through an aquarium. Some of the vitrines are large enough to put on a scene involving two or three people, or, for that matter, with giant tuna if Area wished to fill the vitrines with sea-water. Second, every month or so Area picks a "theme" ("Science Fiction," "The Automobile," "Suburbia" are among those they have done do far) which is reflected by various stagings set up in these aforementioned vitrines.

During the month in which *The Paris Review* hopes to have its revel, the people who run Area are considering (actually on the recommendation of the *Review*) the theme "Great Moments in Literature." In truth, the Area entrepreneurs are somewhat leery of the concept—"We're not quite sure there's enough there, are we?"

In the hope of persuading Area that the theme "Great Moments in Literature" is viable and appropriate (certainly for the night of the *Review*'s revel), the staff of this magazine offered help with various proposals which might be designed for the club's vitrines. These follow—a series of story boards (to use an advertising term) that have been illustrated charmingly on our behalf by Roz Chast. The individual ideas have been listed under the heading "Proposal" together with their disposition, a final decision made either by the *Review* staff or the Area people.

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PROPOSAL: Marcel Proust shown dipping his madeleine cookie into his tea, circa 1909, the famous mnemonic act which produced a rush of childhood memories culminating in the noted madeleine episode of *Swann's Way* and providing the framework for *Remembrance of Things Past.*

REJECTED: Too obscure. Not enough action.

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PROPOSAL: Colette in bed spanking one of her cats.

REJECTED: No historical evidence that Colette ever did spank one.

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PROPOSAL: Herman Melville sitting in his den, bent over his writing desk, occasionally scratching his ear with a quill, and trying to come up with the first line of *Moby Dick*. On a large scroll of paper the viewer can see through the vitrine window that he has crossed out "Call me Harry," "Call me Lucas," "Call me Charlie," "Call me Jake," "Call me Buck," etc. etc.

REJECTED: Too esoteric. Too confusing to revelers and party crashers unaware of the classic's first line.

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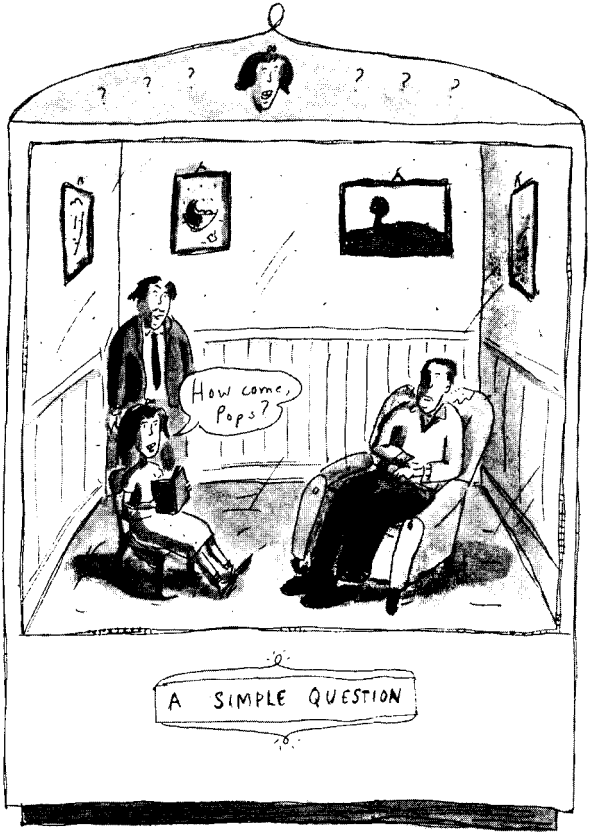

PROPOSAL: A twilight scene in the drawing-room of William Makepeace Thackeray's home in Kensington. His youngest daughter looks up from a book she has been reading and asks her father, "Papa, why do you not write books like *Nicholas Nickleby*?"

REJECTED: Question too tough. Besides, what Thackeray replied was never recorded by Lord Tennyson, who was a witness to the scene.

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PROPOSAL: The scene at Bread Loaf Writers Conference when Archibald MacLeish's poetry reading was interrupted by Robert Frost who, after whispering loudly, "Archie's poems all have the same tune," lit fire to a handful of mimeographed papers to disrupt the proceedings.

REJECTED: New York City fire laws prohibit. Besides, possibility of soggy matches and the actor playing "Frost" unable to get fire started.

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PROPOSAL: A diorama devoted entirely to a succession of famous literary fights: Alexandre Dumas (père) losing his trousers in his first duel; Verlaine shooting Rimbaud in the wrist in Brussels; Hemingway and Max Eastman wrestling in Max Perkins' office; Theodore Dreiser slapping Sinclair Lewis in the Metropolitan Club; the "Night of the Tiny Fist" when Norman Mailer hit Gore Vidal in the eye at Lally Weymouth's salon; etc., etc.

REJECTED: Too large a contingent necessary backstage to put on such a massive number of brouhahas; labor costs prohibitive. The order of combatants might get mixed up, so that viewers standing in the corridor would be startled to see Max Eastman shot in the wrist by Verlaine, and so forth.

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PROPOSAL: *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.*

REJECTED: Problem of getting a minor admitted to Area.

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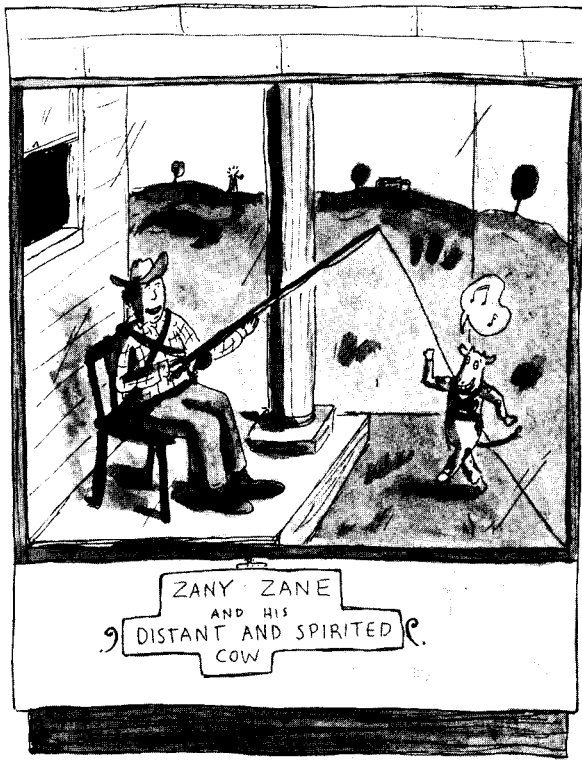

PROPOSAL: Zane Grey on the porch of his home in Altadena, California, harnessed in a sport-fishing chair with the fishing line attached to a distant and spirited cow—the way in which Grey simulated far inland his beloved deep-sea fishing . . . a strenuous habit which eventually caused his death on October 23, 1939.

REJECTED: Too difficult to construct the set within the diorama, especially the distant and spirited cow.

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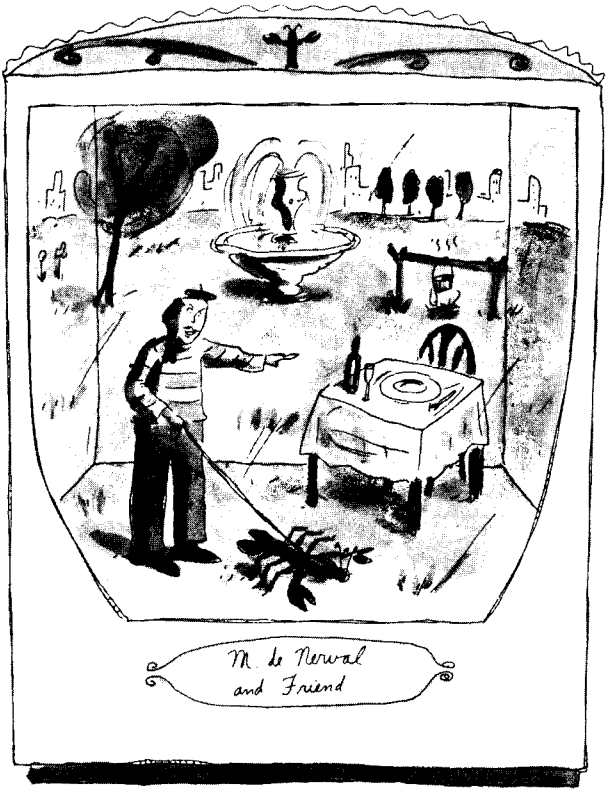

PROPOSAL: On a treadmill within the vitrine Gerard de Nerval, the 19th-century exotic, is walking the lobster (on a pale-blue ribbon leash) from which he hoped to learn "the secrets of the deep." After an hour or so of treadmilling and not having heard a peep from the lobster regarding the secrets of the deep, or anything else for that matter, de Nerval sets a pot on a small brush fire and, preparing the lobster with a nice herbal sauce (3 to 4 lbs. fresh minced green herbs; parsley, chervil, and tarragon or parsley only), he tucks a napkin under his chin and falls to.

REJECTED: Antianimalarian. Also not historically accurate; there is no evidence that de Nerval ever ate his pet lobster. Fire laws once again a problem.

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PROPOSAL: "All happy families are alike; but every unhappy family is unhappy in its own fashion"—Tolstoy.

REJECTED: Small Area diorama would be too crowded, thus rendering all the families obviously unhappy.

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PROPOSAL: The scene following the lunch given by Carson McCullers in Nyack, NY, in 1959 at which Isak Dinesen, Marilyn Monroe, and her husband, Arthur Miller, were asked to tap dance on the marble-topped dining room table.

REJECTED: McCullers' proposal was declined by all those at the table; thus any re-creation lacks visual excitement.

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PROPOSAL: The scene at Turgenev's home at the moment that the visiting Tolstoy falls asleep before the author's eyes after reading a few pages of *Fathers and Sons*. (1861).

REJECTED: Not enough action. Too ho-hum. Observers unfamiliar with the story might assume that Tolstoy was falling asleep over his own book.

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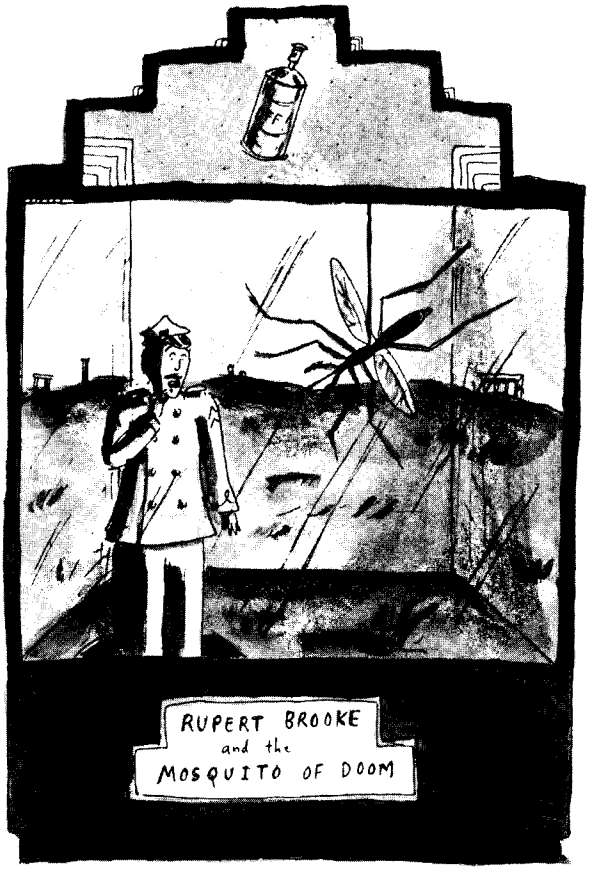

PROPOSAL: Rupert Brooke being bitten on the lip by a mosquito while serving with the Royal Naval Division on Skyros . . . the infection which eventually caused his death from blood poisoning.

REJECTED: Difficult to find a mosquito large enough to be identified by the people in front of the vitrine. A dummy mosquito, made of wire, say, would tend to overpower "Rupert Brooke," and make it look as though the poet were under attack by a buzzard, or a fugitive from a low-budget sci-fi movie.

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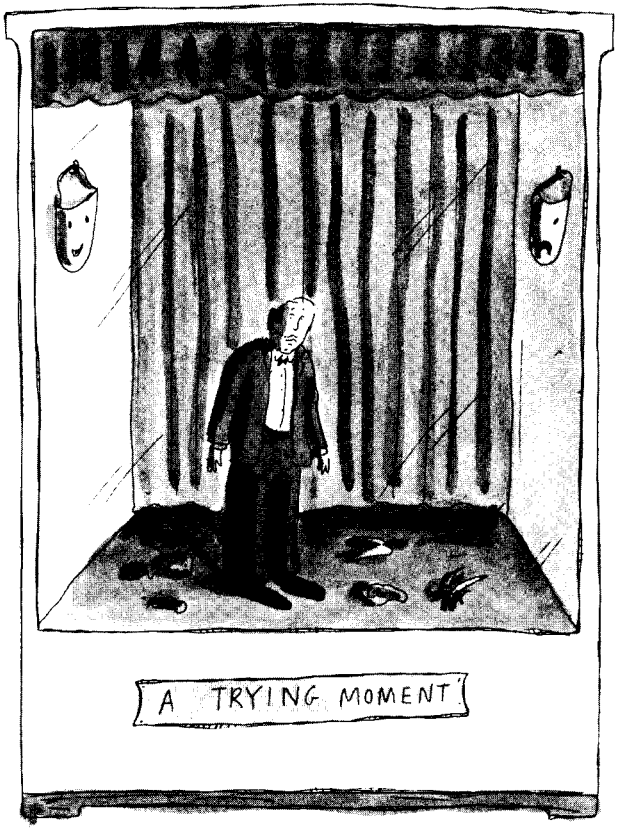

PROPOSAL: Henry James being hissed off the stage after taking an opening-night bow at the debut of his first (and last) play, *Guy Domville.*

REJECTED: Might leave viewers with the wrong impression of Henry James. Leon Edel would be upset. Also, vegetables might go bad.

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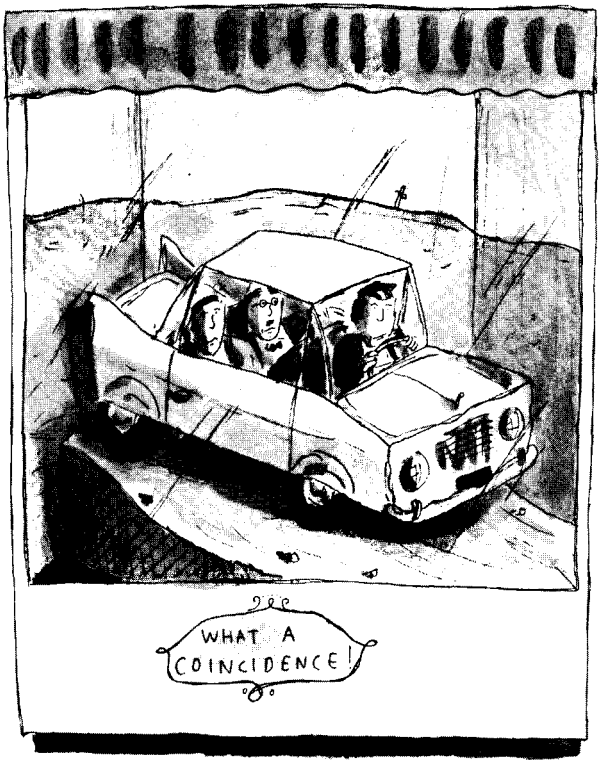

PROPOSAL: Thomas Wolfe and James Joyce *not* meeting while passengers in the same car touring the battlefields of Waterloo.

REJECTED: Too static; not enough for "Wolfe" and "Joyce" to do. Also too difficult to fit a car in a vitrine at Area, much less the battlefields of Waterloo.

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PROPOSAL: The death of Emile Zola in his sleep from inhaling smoke from a clogged chimney.

REJECTED: Easy enough to depict (by covering the viewing window with smoked cellophane), but likely to confuse the audience, which might assume the vignette was not yet prepared (or out of order) and because of this leave the revel in a huff.

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Postscript

The careful reader will notice that all the proposals were turned down. The single major problem has been the difficulty of making the crowds in the corridors understand the scene inside the vitrine. A number of possibilities were considered: 1) a Columbia graduate student standing in the corridor to explain and answer questions; 2) issuing the kind of portable tape-machines that are available in art museums; 3) a push-button device beside every exhibit which when touched would initiate a robot-like voice speaking through a little grille to explain, for example, that "Call me Ishmael" is the first line of *Moby Dick*, or "All happy families are alike" is how *Anna Karenina* starts off, etc., etc.; or perhaps an illuminated legend in a large frame affixed off to the side of each vitrine explaining textually and with color-coding graphs and so forth what is going on within. All these aids were considered unfeasible, impractical, too costly, and possibly condescending as well. So the whole project hangs in abeyance. Ah well! As Dostoyevsky once wrote: "Man is a pliable animal, a being who gets accustomed to everything." Perhaps that should be the scene in the first diorama the revelers see as they enter Area: Fyodor sitting in his vitrine-sized cell (he was incarcerated in Siberia at the time) looking out at the revelers and saying exactly that. He could be speaking through a bullhorn.

—GAP, DSP, JMcC, MS, JL, JD

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Yves Bonnefoy

The Lure of the Threshold

Knock,
Knock forever.

In the lure of the threshold.

At the sealed door,
At the empty phrase.
In iron, awakening
Only the word, iron.

In speech, blackness.

In he who sits
By night, motionless
At his table, laden
With signs, glimmers. And is called

Three times, but does not get up.

* * *

In the gathering, that failed
Of celebration.

In the deformed wheat,
The parching wine.

In the hand that holds on
To an absent hand.

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In the uselessness
Of recollection.

In writing, hastily
Garnered at night

And in words that die out
Before dawn.

* * *

In the mouth that asks
Another mouth
For honey no summer
Can ripen.

In the abrupt note
That grows louder until,
Glacial, it almost
Becomes the crossing

Then the insistence
Of the hushed note
That releases its naked
Swell, under the star.

In the star's gleam
On iron.
In the anguish of bodies
Not finding each other.

Knock, late.

Lips wanting
Even as the blood flows,

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The fist knocking
Most imperatively when
The arm is no more than
Scattered ashes.

* * *
* * *

Further than the dog
In the black earth
The ferryman rushes, crying
Toward the far shore.
Mouth filled with mud,
Devoured eyes,
Drive your boat for us
Into matter.
What bottom, what drift your pole may find,
You do not know,
Nor what, seized with blackness, the words
Of the book will light up.

Further than the dog
Under its thin cover,
They wrap you, ferryman,
In a cloak of signs.
They advise you, they give you
A key, two keys, the vain
Map of another earth.
You listen, your eyes already turned
To the dark water.
You listen, and the last few
Shovelfuls fall.

Further than the dog
That died yesterday,
Ferryman, they would plant
Your phosphorescence.
The hands of young girls

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Have loosened the earth
From the stem that bears
The gold of future seed.
You can still see the heavy
Shadows of their arms,
The swelling of breasts
Under the tunic.
Laughter flares above you
But you move away.

You were thrown bleeding
Into the light.
You opened your eyes, crying,
To name the day.
But the day was hardly uttered
When the curtain of blood
Fell again, with a huge dull sound
Over the light.
Laughter flares above you
Glowing in the thickness
That is breaking up.
Turn away
From the fires of our shore.

Further than the fire
That barely burns,
The witness of fire, the undeciphered,
Is laid on a bed of leaves.
Faces turned toward us,
Readers of signs,
What wind from the other face, unheard,
Will make them rustle?
What hesitant hands,
As if finding, grasping,
Leafing through the darkness
Of the pages? What hands

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Meditating, as if
They had found what?

* * *

Oh, bend down, comfort,
Cloud
Of a smile stirring
In a clear face.

Be for him who shivered
Against the shore
Pharaoh's daughter
And her serving-girls

Whom the water, even
Before daybreak,
Reflects reversed
In their red dresses.

* * *

And as a hand sorts
On a table
The nearly sprouted wheat
From the dark tares

And pausing on the water
Of black wood, is doubled,
A reflection where meaning
Suddenly forms,

Receive, to sleep
In your speech,
Our words riddled
By the wind's blast.

* * *

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"Though you come to drink of this wine,
I will not let you drink it.
Though you come wanting to understand
This dark bread, burnt by the fire of a promise,
I will not let you bring light to it.
Though you come only to quench your thirst
With water, a little warm water, drunk
After other lips in the middle of the night
Between the unmade bed and the simple earth,
I will not let you touch the glass.
Though you come so that the child can shine
Above the flame that seals him
In the deathlessness of the April hour
When he may laugh, and you may, and the bird alights
In the nameless hour that welcomes it,
I will not let you lift your hands above the hearth of my
bright kingship.

Though you come,
I will not let you appear.
Though you ask,
I will not let you know what name your lips form."

* * *

Further than the stones
That the workman, standing
On the wall, tears away
Late, in the night.

Further than the crow's flank, that marks
The mist with its rusty stain
And passes into the dream letting out a cry
Full of black earth.

Further than summer
Broken by the spade.
Further than the cry
Into another dream,

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The one who stands for us
Rushes, crying,
A shadow that hope has thrown
Against origin,

And the only oneness, this movement
Of the body when—now leaning
His full weight on the pole,
He forgets us.

* * *

We, the voice driven back
By the wind of words.
We, the work torn apart
By their whirling.
For if I come to you, who have spoken,
Rubble, streamings,
Echoes, the room is empty.
Is it "another," this call that answers me,
Or, again, myself?
And, multiplied under the echo's arch,
Am I no more
Than one of its arrows
Shot into things?

We
Among the noises,
We
One of them.

Detached
From the crumbling wall,
Hollowed, splayed out,
Emptied,
Reddening,
Swelling with a distant fullness.

* * *

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Look at this flooded stream,
It rushes howling into empty summer
And yet, motionless,
It is a harnessed team rearing
And a blind face.
Listen.
The echo is not around the noise but in the noise,
Its hollow depth.
The cliffs of noise,
The narrows where its waters break,
The saxifrage
Tear from your sight with a final
Eagle's cry.
Where the breast of the voice of water strikes,
You cannot hear it,
But be upborne, dazzled eye,
By the raucous wing.

We
In the burst of noise,
We
Upborne.

We, when the flood
With broken hands
Hurls, rolls, retrieves
The absolute of stones.

The predator
At the peak of its flight,
Crying out,
Bends back and tears itself.
From the breast cleft by the dark beak
The void spills out.
At the peak of speech there is still noise,
In the work
The swell of a second noise.
But at the peak of noise the light changes.

* * *

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All the wavering visible
Unwrites itself,
Embers through which the call
Of other fields passes

And the lightning is at peace
Above the trees,
Breast where sleep and death
Stir in their dreams,

And the night of the world,
A color, burns
Like a painted cloth spreading
In black water

Now, when the image
Divides the flow,
Throwing its seed, fire,
Against a pole.

* * *

Hour
Cut off the sum, now.
Presence
Undeceived by death. Bulb
That kneels in silence
And burns
Deflected, shaken
By the summitless night.

I hear you
Vibrate in the nullity of the work
That labors through the world.
I hear the trampling
Of calls
Whose pasture is the burning bulb.
I take up fistfuls of earth

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In this smooth-walled splaying out
Where there is no bottom
Before daybreak.
I hear you, I catch
The whole world
In your rope basket. Outside
It is still the time of suffering
Before the image.
In the closed hand of the outside
The wheat of things of the world
Has begun to sprout.

* * *
* * *

The pilot
Who touches your shoulder
With his meditative pole,
And you, already the one whom night covers
When your pole seeks, in vain,
The river's bottom,

He who is, he who will perish,
Who can hope, who promise?
Bending down, you see a face
Well up in the water

As a fire kindles, in the reflection
Of your shoulder.

translated from the French
by Richard Pevear

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Three Poems by Velimir Khlebnikov

Untitled

Genghis Khan me, you midnight plantation!
Dark blue birch trees, sound in my ear!
Zarathuse me, you twilight horizons!
Mozarticulate me, dark blue sky!
Goya, gloaming, glooming!
Rops, you of midnight clouds!
But the storm of smiles vanishes
In cackling and the shock of claws
and leaves me to outface the hangman,
To brave the stillness of the night.
I summoned up you barefaced insolents,
From rivers made the drowned girls rise,
Their flowering cry—rosemary, remembrance—
Reverberant in the sails of the night.
Again earth's axis splashes round,
Brings on the overwhelming evening.
I dreamed I saw a salmon-girl
Beneath a midnight waterfall.
Let storm-drenched pines make Mamai-monsters
Beneath the Batu-beating clouds:
Words come on, like Cain to silences,
And all this sacred stillness dies.
And to stone entertainment with heavy foot-fall
Comes heaven-blue Hasdrubal, henchmen and all.

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Untitled

I see them—Crab, Ram, Bull,
And all the world is only shell
Whose pearl and opalescence
Is my impotence.
A knock, a chirr, container of whistle and rustle,
And I realize then that waves and thoughts are kin.
Here, there, in milky ways, women rise
Through darkness drunk on drowsy prose.
On such a night, no grave is grim . . .
And evening women, evening wine
Become a single diadem
Whose baby boy I am.

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O Garden of Animals!

Where iron bars seem like a father who stops a bloody fight to remind his sons they are brothers.

Where eagles perch like eternity, crowned by a day without an evening.

Where a swan is like winter all over, but its beak is like autumn leaves.

Where deer are startled again and again, beneath their branching stone.

Where a clean-shaven soldier throws dirt at a tiger, all because the tiger is greater.

Where a peacock drops its tail, and it looks like Siberia seen from the height of a rock on a day of early frost, when the golden forest fire of leaf-fall enamels the green and the mottled blue of pine groves, when over it all move shadows of racing clouds, and the rock itself seems like the body of a bird.

Where fishwingers sit comically grooming each other, and display the touching compassion of Old World Landowners.

Where man and dog are strangely joined, in a baboon.

Where a camel knows the essence of Buddhism, and suppresses a Chinese smile.

Where a snow-white beard surrounds the face of a tiger, surrounds its venerable Moslem eyes, and we honor the first Mohammedan and drink in the beauty of Islam.

Where a small bird drags behind itself the golden flitter of sunset, to which it has learned to pray.

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Where lions get up and glance with weary faces at the sky.

Where at last we grow ashamed of ourselves, and begin to suspect we are older, more worn than we once imagined.

Where elephants sway like mountains during an earthquake, and stick out their trunks for handouts from a small boy, saying "Feed me! Feed me!", echoing that ancient refrain. And they wheeze like pine trees in autumn, and move their wise eyes and their undulating ears.

Where the polar bear hunts like an osprey, tracking his nonexistent prey.

Where we watch in a seal the torments of a sinner, as it cuts the water and wails its unrelenting wail.

Where the beasts have learned to sleep while we gawk.

Where the bat hangs sleeping, and its capsized body resembles a Russian's heart.

Where a sable displays two tiny ears, like a pair of nights in springtime.

Where I search for new rhythms, whose beats are animals and men.

Where the animals in their cages glow, as meaning glows in language.

O Garden of Animals!

translated from the Russian by
Paul Schmidt

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André Breton

The Verb to Be

I know the general outline of despair. Despair has no wings, it doesn't necessarily sit at a cleared table in the evening on a terrace by the sea. It's despair and not the return of a quantity of insignificant facts like seeds that leave one furrow for another at nightfall. It's not the moss that forms on a rock or the foam that rocks in a glass. It's a boat riddled with snow, if you will, like birds that fall and their blood doesn't have the slightest thickness. I know the general outline of despair. A very small shape, defined by jewels worn in the hair. That's despair. A pearl necklace for which no clasp can be found and whose existence can't even hang by a thread. That's despair for you. Let's not go into the rest. Once we begin to despair we don't stop. I myself despair of the lampshade around four o'clock, I despair of the fan towards midnight, I despair of the cigarette smoked by men on death row. I know the general outline of despair. Despair has no heart, my hand always touches breathless despair, the despair whose mirrors never tell us if it's dead. I live on that despair which enchants me. I love that blue fly which hovers in the sky at the hour when the stars hum. I know the general outline of the despair with long slender surprises, the despair of pride, the despair of anger. I get up every day like everyone else and I stretch my arms against a floral wallpaper, I don't remember anything and it's always in despair that I discover the beautiful uprooted trees of night. The air in the room is as beautiful as drumsticks. What weathery weather. I know the general outline of despair. It's like the curtain's wind which holds out a helping hand. Can you imagine such a despair? Fire! Ah they're on their way . . . Help! Here they come falling down the stairs . . . And the

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ads in the newspaper, and the illuminated signs along the canal. Sandpile, beat it, you dirty sandpile! In its general outline despair has no importance. It's a squad of trees which will eventually make a forest, it's a squad of stars which will eventually make one less day, it's a squad of one-less-days which will eventually make up my life.

translated from the French
by Bill Zavatsky and Zack Rogow

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Ingeborg Bachmann

Night Flight

Our field is the sky,
tilled by the sweat of motors,
in the face of night,
at the risk of our dreams—

dreamt at Golgotha and on funeral pyres,
beneath the roof of the world, whose shingles
the wind has carried away—and now rain, rain, rain
in our house, while blind bats
circle in the water mills.
Who lived there? Whose hands were pure?
Who glowed in the night,
a ghost to other ghosts?

Sheltered in steel plumage, instruments
interrogate the air, control clocks and meters
examine cloud thickets, and love grazes
our heart's forgotten language:
short and long . . . For an hour
hail beats the drum of our ear
which turns away from us, eavesdrops and triumphs.

Sun and earth haven't set—
just wandered off as stars, unrecognizable.

We have risen from a port
where the return home doesn't count,
nor freight nor catch.
India's spices and silks from Japan
belong to the traders
like fish to the nets.

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Yet a fragrance can be sensed
ahead of the comets,
and the weave of the air
torn by fallen comets.
Call it the status of the lonely
where wonderment is still alive.
Nothing more.

We have risen and the cloisters are empty,
since we have endured, an order that can't save or teach.
Action isn't the pilots' concern. They have their eyes
fixed on defense posts, and spread out on their knees
the map of a world to which nothing can be added.

Who lives down below? Who cries . . .
Who's lost his housekey?
Who can't find his bed, who sleeps
on doorsteps? Who, when morning comes,
will dare to interpret the silver trail: look, above me . . .
When water pushes the mill wheel again,
who'll dare to remember the night?

translated from the German
by Mark Anderson

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Portfolio

Portraits

Richard Prince

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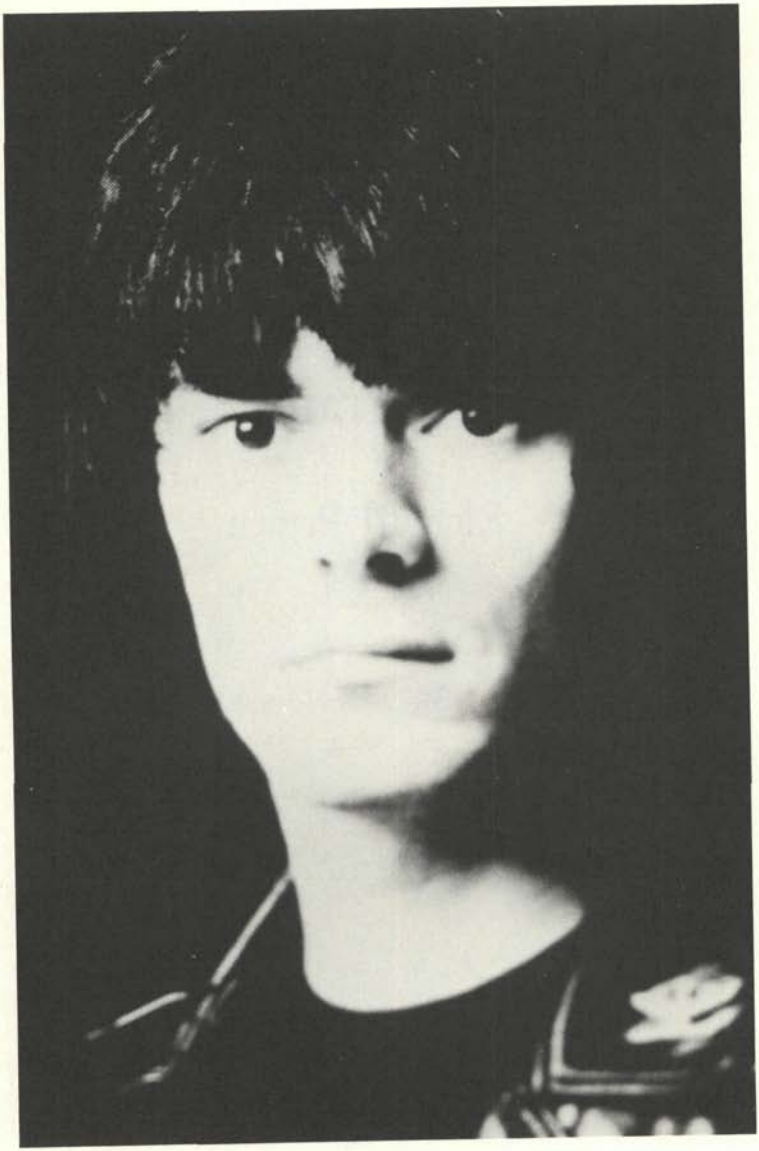

Dee Dee Ramone, Ramone

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Tina Weymouth, Talking Head

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Amos Poe, filmmaker

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Kathy Acker, writer

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Laurie Anderson, performance artist

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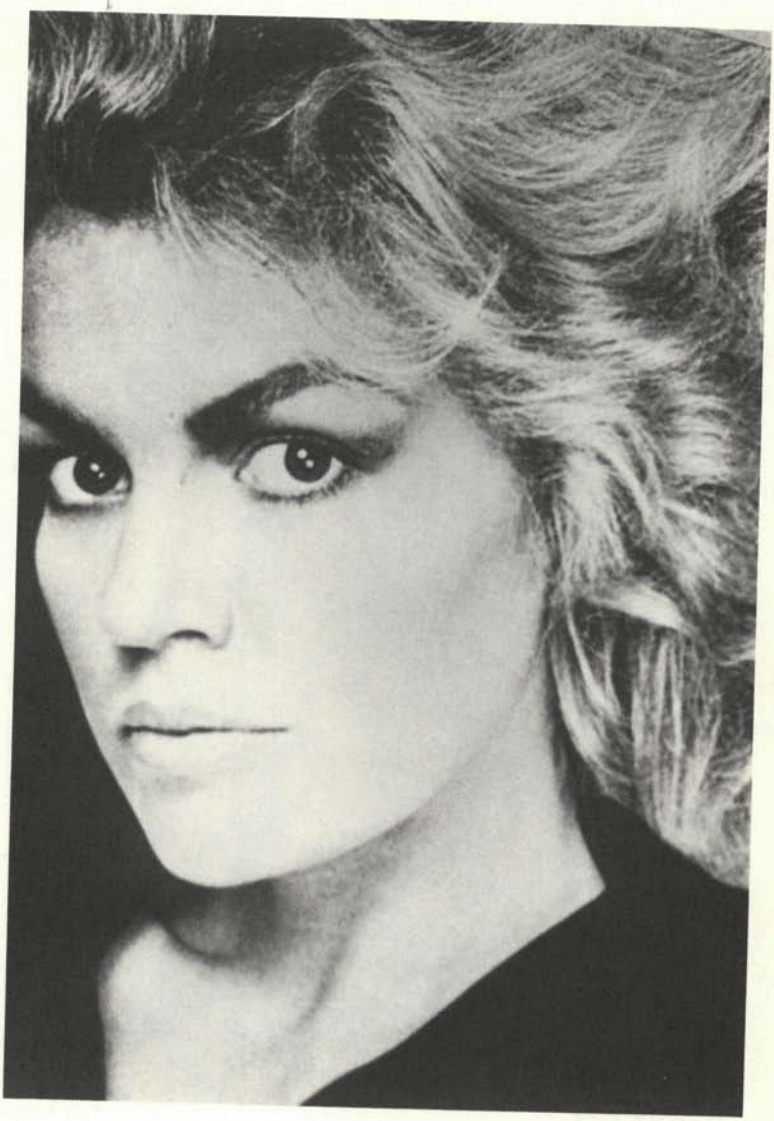

Sharon Barr, actress

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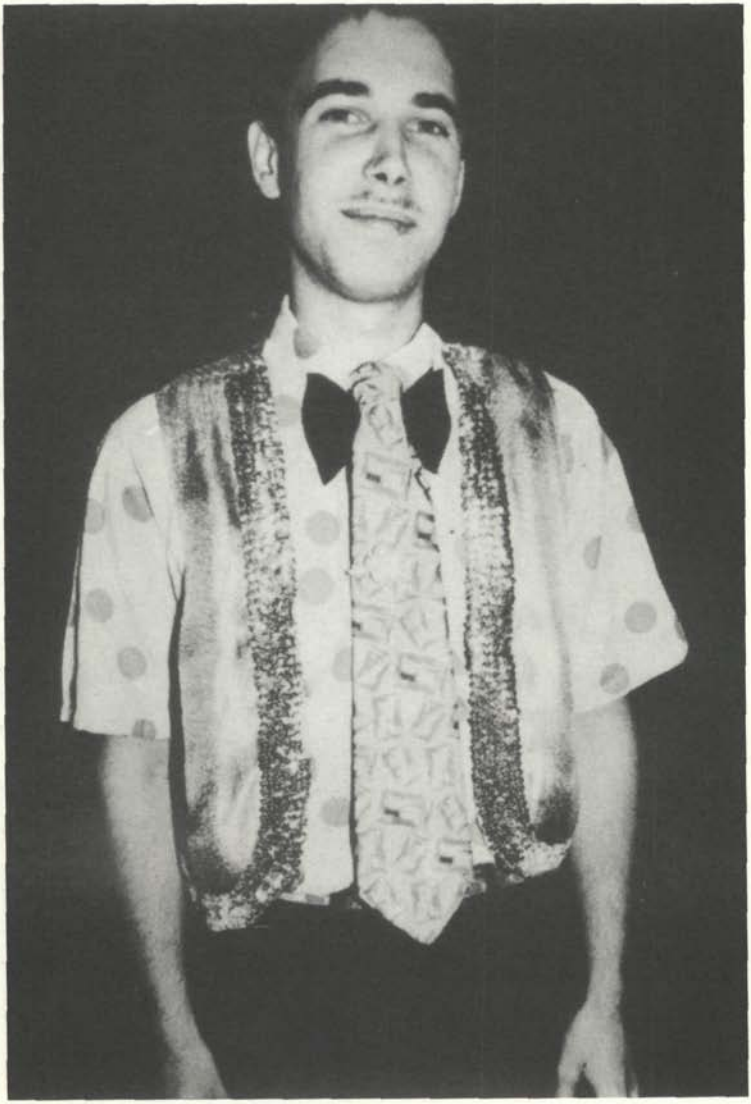

Jeff Koons, artist

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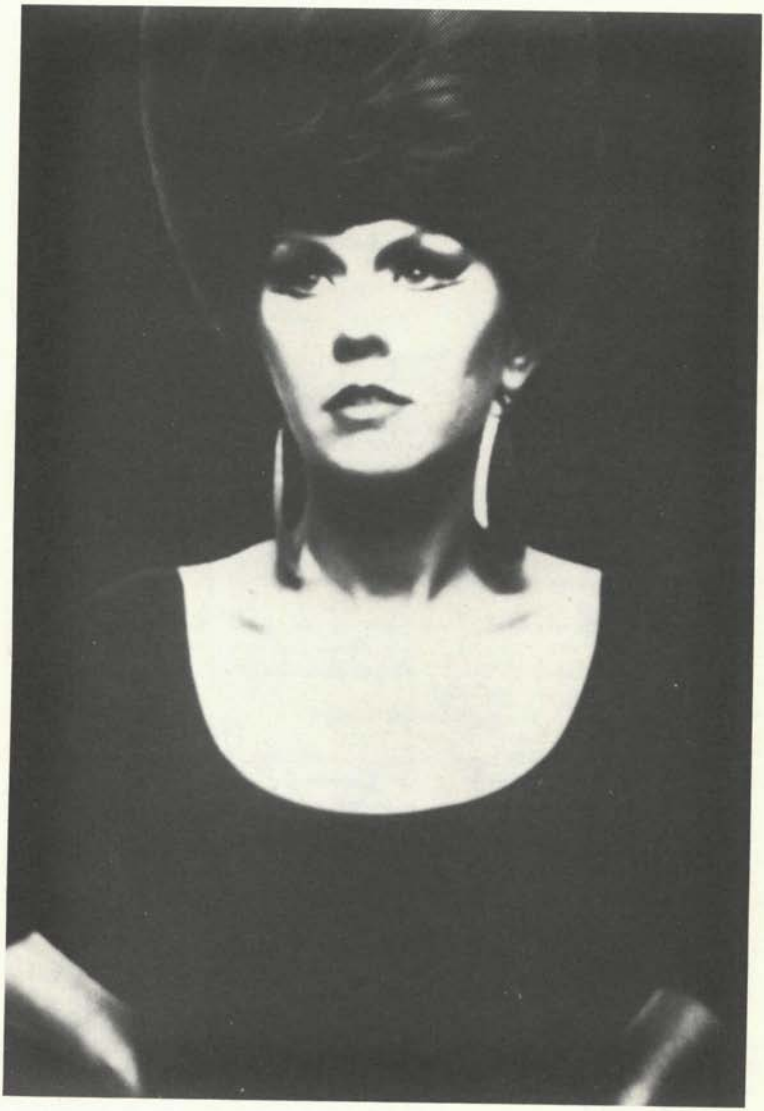

Kate Pierson, B'52

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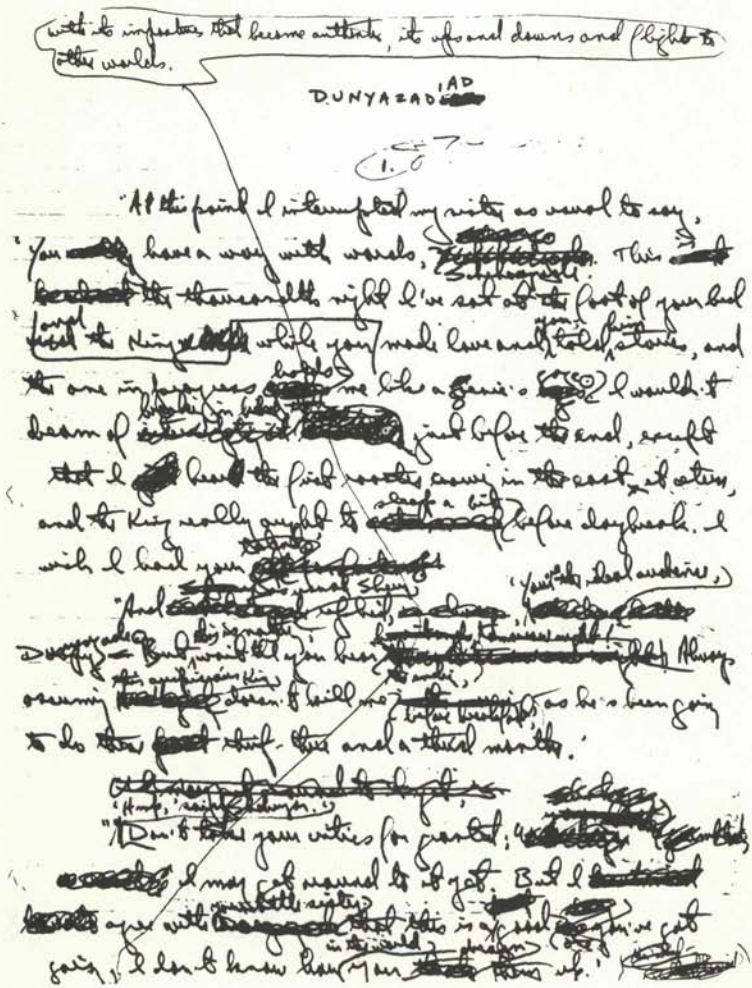
with its inflations that become outbursts, its ups and downs and flights to other worlds.

DUNYAZAD 'AD

1.

"At this point I interrupted my sister as usual to say, 'You have a way with words, [illegible]. This [illegible] thousand-and-one night I've sat at the foot of your bed [illegible] while you made love and told stories, and the one in your arms [illegible] like a genie's [illegible] I would. I dream of [illegible] just before the end, except that I [illegible] the first rooster crows in the east at eleven, and the King really ought to [illegible] before daybreak. I wish I had your [illegible]'

"And [illegible] (your dear audience),

[illegible] Dunyazad would tell you how [illegible] Always assuming [illegible] dream. I will not [illegible] as he's been going to do [illegible] three and a third months.'

[illegible]

"Don't take your cities for granted; [illegible] I may get annoyed at it yet. But I [illegible] agree with [illegible] this is [illegible] we get going, I don't know how [illegible] up.'

A John Barth manuscript page, page one of a novella from the Chimera *series.*

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The Art of Fiction LXXXVI

John Barth

This interview with John Barth was conducted in the studios of KUHT in Houston, Texas, for a series entitled "The Writer in Society." The stage set was made up to resemble a writer's den—the decor including a small globe of the world, bronze Remington-like animal statuary, a standup bookshelf with glass shelves on which were placed some potted plants and a haphazard collection of books, a few volumes of the Readers Digest condensed novel series among them. Large pots of plants were set about. Mr. Barth sat amongst them in a cane chair.

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He is a tall man, domed forehead; a pair of very large-rimmed spectacles give him a professorial, owlish look. He is a caricaturist's delight. He sports a very wide and straight moustache. Recently he had grown a beard. In manner, Barth has been described as a combination of British officer and Southern gentleman. He was born in 1930 in Maryland, the son of a candy-store owner. Resolving to be a "distinguished something-or-other," he abandoned his music studies at Juilliard (he hoped to become a jazz orchestrator) and enrolled as a journalism major at Johns Hopkins University. He has taught at Pennsylvania State University and the State University at Buffalo, and since 1973 he has been back in his native Maryland as a professor of English and creative writing at Johns Hopkins. Occasionally he plays the drums with a neighborhood jazz combo.

"We'll have to stick to the channel," he wrote in his first novel, The Floating Opera, *"and let the creeks and coves go by." Every novel since then has been a refutation of this dictum of sticking to the main topic. He is especially influenced by the classical cyclical tales such as Burton's* Thousand and One Nights *and the* Gesta Romanorum, *and by the complexities of such modern masters as Nabokov, Borges, and Beckett. For novels distinguished by a wide range of erudition, invention, wit, historical references, whimsy, bawdiness, and a great richness of image and style, Barth has been described as an "ecologist of information." The work besides* The Floating Opera *(1956) includes* The End of the Road *(1958),* The Sot-Weed Factor *(1960),* Giles Goat-Boy *(1966),* Lost in the Funhouse *(1968), which is a collection of short stories including the famous "Night-Sea Journey" narrated by a sperm,* Chimera *(1972), for which he won the National Book Award,* Letters *(1979),* Sabbatical *(1982), and* The Friday Book *(1984).*

*Of his working habits to produce such a formidable amount of work (*Letters *is a volume of 722 small-print pages) Barth has said that he rises at six in the morning and puts an electric percolator in the kitchen so that during the course of sitting for six hours at his desk he has an excuse for the exercise of walking back and forth from his study to the kitchen for a cup*

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of coffee. He speaks of measuring his work not by the day (as Hemingway did) but by the month and the year. "That way you don't feel so terrible if you put in three days straight without turning up much of anything. You don't feel blocked."

This interview, being restricted to a half-hour's conversation for a television audience, was thought to be a bit short by the usual standards of the magazine. Being such a master of the prolix it was assumed that Barth would surely make some additions. Extra questions were sent him. The interview was returned to these offices with the questions unanswered, and the text of the interview edited and shortened. Perhaps Barth had not noticed the additional questions. This interview was sent back, this time with a small emolument attached for taking the trouble. The interview was returned once again, along with the uncashed cheque, with the following statement: "It doesn't displease me *to hear that our interview will be perhaps the shortest one you've run. In fact, it's a bit shorter now than it was before (enclosed). Better not run it by me again!"*

INTERVIEWER

When were the first stirrings? When did you actually understand that writing was going to be your profession? Was there a moment?

JOHN BARTH

It seems to happen later in the lives of American writers than Europeans. American boys and girls don't grow up thinking, "I'm going to be a writer," the way we're told Flaubert did; at about age twelve he decided he would be a great French writer and, by George, he turned out to *be* one. Writers in this country, particularly novelists, are likely to come to the medium through some back door. Nearly every writer I know was going to be something else, and then found himself writing by a kind of *passionate default.* In my case, I was going to be a musician. Then I found out that while I had an amateur's flair, I did not have preprofessional talent. So I went on to Johns Hopkins University to find something else to do. There I found myself

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writing stories—making all the mistakes that new writers usually make. After I had written about a novel's worth of bad pages, I understood that while I was not doing it well, *that* was the thing I was going to do. I don't remember that realization coming as a swoop of insight, or as an exhilarating experience, but as a kind of absolute recognition that for well or for ill, that was the way I was going to spend my life. I had the advantage at Johns Hopkins of a splendid old Spanish poet-teacher, with whom I read *Don Quixote.* I can't remember a thing he said about *Don Quixote*, but old Pedro Salinas, now dead, a refugee from Franco's Spain, embodied to my innocent, ingenuous eyes, the possibility that a life devoted to the making of sentences and the telling of stories can be dignified and noble. Whether the works have turned out to be dignified and noble is another question, but I think that my experience is not uncommon: you decide to be a violinist, you decide to be a sculptor or a painter, but you find yourself being a novelist.

INTERVIEWER

What was the musical instrument you started out with?

BARTH

I played drums. What I hoped to be eventually was an orchestrator—what in those days was called an arranger. An arranger is a chap who takes someone else's melody and turns it to his purpose. For better or worse, my career as a novelist has been that of an arranger. My imagination is most at ease with an old literary convention like the epistolary novel, or a classical myth—received melody lines, so to speak, which I then reorchestrate to my purpose.

INTERVIEWER

What's first when you sit down to begin a novel. Is it the form, as in the epistolary novel, or character, or plot?

BARTH

Different books start in different ways. I sometimes wish that I were the kind of writer who begins with a passionate interest

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in a character and then, as I've heard other writers say, just gives that character elbow room and sees what he or she wants to do. I'm not that kind of writer. Much more often I start with a shape or form, maybe an image. The floating showboat, for example, which became the central image in *The Floating Opera*, was a photograph of an actual showboat I remember seeing as a child. It happened to be named *Captain Adams' Original Unparalleled Floating Opera*, and when nature, in her heavy-handed way, gives you an image like that, the only honorable thing to do is to make a novel out of it. This may not be the most elevated of approaches. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, for example, comes to the medium of fiction with a high moral purpose; he wants, literally, to try to change the world through the medium of the novel. I honor and admire that intention, but just as often a great writer will come to his novel with a much less elevated purpose than wanting to undermine the Soviet Government. Henry James wanted to write a book in the shape of an hourglass. Flaubert wanted to write a novel about *nothing*. What I've learned is that the muses' decision to sing or not to sing is not based on the elevation of your moral purpose—they will sing or not regardless.

INTERVIEWER

What was in your way that you had to get out of your way?

BARTH

What was in my way? Chekhov makes a remark to his brother, the brother he was always hectoring in letters, "What the aristocrats take for granted, we pay for with our youth." I had to pay my tuition in literature that way. I came from a fairly unsophisticated family from the rural southern Eastern Shore of Maryland—which is very "deep South" in its ethos. I went to a mediocre public high school (which I enjoyed), fell into a good university on a scholarship, and then had to learn, from scratch, that civilization existed, that literature had been going on. That kind of innocence is the reverse of the exquisite sophistication with which a writer like Vladimir Nabokov comes to the medium—knowing it already, as if he's been in on the conver-

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sation since it began. Yet the innocence that writers like myself have to overcome, if it doesn't ruin us altogether, can become a sort of strength. You're not intimidated by your distinguished predecessors, the great literary dead. You have a chutzpah in your approach to the medium which may carry you through those apprentice days when nobody's telling you you're any good because you aren't yet. Everything is a discovery. I read Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* when I was about twenty-five. If I had read it when I was nineteen, I might have been intimidated; the same with Dickens and other great novelists. In my position I remained armed with a kind of "invincible innocence"—I think that's what the Catholics call it—that with the best of fortune can survive even later experience and sophistication and carry you right to the end of the story.

INTERVIEWER

What were the particular guides that helped you?

BARTH

The great guides were the books I discovered in the Johns Hopkins Library, where my student job was to file books away. One was more or less encouraged to take a cart of books and go back into the stacks and not come out for seven or eight hours. So I read what I was filing. My great teachers (the best thing that can happen to a writer) were Scheherazade, Homer, Virgil, and Boccaccio; also the great Sanskrit taletellers. I was impressed forever with the width as well as the depth of literature—just what a kid from the sticks, from the swamp, in my case, needed. As an undergraduate I had a couple of tutors in writing who were not themselves writers. They were simply good coaches. I've thought of that in a chastened way since. Dealing with my own students, many of whom are very skillful, advanced apprentice writers, I often wonder whether it's a good idea for them to have, at the other end of the table, somebody who's already working at a certain level of success and notoriety. Is that not perhaps intimidating? I just don't know, but I suspect the trade-off is fair enough. I might have learned some things faster had I been working with an established writer rather than a very sympathetic coach.

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INTERVIEWER

In browsing through the libraries, was it the concept of simply telling stories that fascinated you, or was it the characters that came through the works you read? What was it that struck the spark?

BARTH

It was not the characters. Perhaps I would be a better novelist in the realm of characterization had it been. No, it was the mere mass of the narrative. My apprenticeship was a kind of baptist total immersion in "the ocean of rivers of stories"—that's the name of one of those old Sanskrit jobs that I read in my filing days . . . one volume at a time up to volume seventeen. I think the sweetest kind of apprenticeship that a narrative artist can serve is that sort of immersion in the waters of narrative, where by a kind of osmosis you pick up early what a talented writer usually learns last: the management of narrative pace, keeping the story going.

INTERVIEWER

I noticed you call it coaching rather than teaching. I don't think I've ever heard that phrase used to describe that relationship.

BARTH

Coaching is more accurate. God knows whether we should be doing it in the universities at all. I happen to think there's some justification for having courses in so-called creative writing. I know from happy experience with young writers that the muses make no distinction between undergraduates and graduate students. The muses know only expert writers and less expert writers. A beginner—such as I was when, with the swamp still on my shoes, I came into Johns Hopkins as an undergraduate—needs to be taught that literature is there; here are some examples of it, and here's how the great writers do it. That's teaching. In time, a writer, or any artist, stops making mistakes on a crude, first level, and begins making mistakes on the next, more elevated level. And then finally you being to make your mistakes on the highest level—let's say the upper slopes of slippery Parnassus—and it's at that point you need coaching. Now

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sometimes coaching means advising the skier to come down off the advanced slope and back to the bunny hill for a while, back to the snowplow. One must be gentle about it. To shift metaphors violently, one must understand that the house of fiction has many windows; you don't want to defenestrate your young apprentices. But sometimes such a simple thing as suggesting to a student that perhaps realism instead of fantasy may be a more sympathetic genre, or humor instead of the opposite, or the novel rather than the short story—sometimes a simple suggestion like that can be the one that makes things click. It doesn't always.

INTERVIEWER

How confident are you in the house of fiction, or on the upper slopes as you were putting it?

BARTH

About my own position on the giant slalom of the muses?

INTERVIEWER

I don't mean in the eyes of others, but in your own sense of what you're up to.

BARTH

It's a combination of an almost obscene self-confidence and an ongoing terror. You remember the old story of how Hemingway would always record the number of words he wrote each day. When I learned that detail about Hemingway I understood why the poor chap went bonkers and did himself in at the end. The average professional, whether he's good or mediocre, learns enough confidence in himself so that he no longer fears the blank page. About my own fiction: my friend John Hawkes once said of it that it seems spun out against nothingness, simply so that there should not be silence. I understand that. It's Scheherazade's terror: the terror that comes from the literal or metaphorical equating of telling stories with living, with life itself. I understand that metaphor to the marrow of my bones. For me there is always a sense that when this story

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ends maybe the whole world will end; I wonder whether the world's really there when I'm not narrating it. Well, at this stage of my life I have enough confidence in myself to know that the page will fill up. Indeed, because I'm not a very consistent fiction writer (my books don't resemble one another very much), I have an ongoing curiosity about what will happen next. Stendhal said that once when he wanted to commit suicide, he couldn't abide to do it because he wanted to find out what would happen next in French politics. I have a similar curiosity . . . when this long project is over, what will fill the page next? I've never been able to think that far ahead; I can't do it until the project in hand is out of the shop and going through the publisher's presses. Then I begin to think about what will be next. I'm just as curious as the next chap. Maybe more so.

INTERVIEWER

How about in the middle of a book? Do you know in that case what's going to be on the next page?

BARTH

There are writers who have the good fortune to be thinking three novels down the line or even to have two or three going at the same time. Not me.

INTERVIEWER

No, I mean within the same book. Do you know what the last line of the book might be when you start?

BARTH

I have a pretty good sense of where the book is going to go. By temperament I am an incorrigible formalist, not inclined to embark on a project without knowing where I'm going. It takes me about four years to write a novel. To embark on such a project without some idea of what the landfall and the estimated time of arrival were would be rather alarming. But I have learned from experience that there are certain barriers that you cannot cross until you get to them; in a thing as long and complicated as a novel you may not even know the real shape of

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the obstacle until you heave in sight of it, much less how you're going to get around it. I can see in my plans that there will be this enormous pothole to cross somewhere around the third chapter from the end; I'll get out my little pocket calculator and estimate that the pothole will be reached about the second of July, 1986, let's say, and then just trust to God and the muses that by the time I get there I'll know how to get around it.

INTERVIEWER

These are climactic moments that you know you're going to have to deal with?

BARTH

Yes, important moments that I know from my sense of dramaturgy will have to be dealt with: rifles that will have to be fired.

INTERVIEWER

Like the Marabar Caves in *A Passage to India?*

BARTH

Exactly. That's a suspense in the process of writing which I've learned to be both charmed and—faintly, decently—terrified by.

INTERVIEWER

Can you work around and then come back to deal with these climactic moments later?

BARTH

You come to it. Then it's there. Early in the planning of *Sabbatical*, I knew that in the next-to-last chapter, when the characters sail their boat around a certain point, something extraordinary had to happen, something literally marvelous, but I had no idea what that ought to be until they actually did turn that corner. By then the metaphor was clear enough so that the sea monster, which had to surface at that moment, surfaced in my imagination just when it surfaced in the novel.

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INTERVIEWER

When you start on a day's work, do you reread for a while, up to where you stopped the day before?

BARTH

Sure. It's to get the rhythm partly, and partly it's a kind of magic: it *feels* like you're writing, though you're not. The processes get going; the wheels start spinning. I write in longhand. My Baltimore neighbor Anne Tyler and I are maybe the only two writers left who actually write with a fountain pen. She made the remark that there's something about the muscular movement of putting down script on the paper that gets her imagination back in the track where it was. I feel that too, very much so. My sentences in print, as in conversation, tend to go on a while before they stop: I trace that to the cursiveness of the pen. The idea of typing out first drafts, where each letter is physically separated by a little space from the next letter, I find a paralyzing notion. Good old script, which connects this letter to that, and this line to that—well, that's how good plots work, right? When this loops around and connects to that . . .

INTERVIEWER

Do you think word-processors will change the style of writers to come?

BARTH

They may very well. But I remember a colleague of mine at Johns Hopkins, Professor Hugh Kenner, remarking that literature changed when writers began to compose on the typewriter. I raised my hand and said, "Professor Kenner, I still write with a fountain pen." And he said "Never mind. You are *breathing* the air of literature that's been written on the typewriter." So I suppose that my fiction will be word-processed by association, though I myself will not become a green-screener.

INTERVIEWER

Somewhere in *Lost in the Funhouse*, you berate the reader for reading . . .

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BARTH

A dangerous thing to do.

INTERVIEWER

. . . and say that he should be staring at the wall or whatever. Is that something you believe or were you simply having fun?

BARTH

That was the mood of the character in that story, "Life-Story," which also, in my mind, corresponded to an apocalyptic mood in our country at that time: the height of the sixties, when our republic enjoyed a more than usually apocalyptic ambience. A similar sort of apocalyptic feeling was going around about the future of print generally, and the novel in particular. I don't feel strongly about the matter myself. The point of a couple of essays I've written, and some of the stories, is that the death of a genre is not the death of story-telling; story-telling is older than the form of the novel. I must say, though, that my sense of priorities about these matters has changed. In *The Floating Opera*, that first, very youthful novel of mine, the hero, who's a man my present age (he's in his early fifties), has a particular heart condition that has led him to lead his life wondering, as he moves from sentence to sentence, whether he'll get from the subject to the verb, the verb to the object. The characters in the novel I'm working on now—a little like the characters in the last novel, *Sabbatical*—are much more concerned about whether the *world* will last, never mind the novel. Joyce Oates once said she doesn't like "Pop Apocalypses." Though I like that phrase, I find the question of the literal persistence of civilization, in this powder keg we're living in, a much more considerable question than the very trifling matter of whether a particular literary form is kaput, or dies for another two hundred years as happily as it's been dying for the last two hundred.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think that the novelist can have any effect on this portentous thing you're talking about?

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BARTH

I don't think that as a group we'd be any better at running the world than the people who are botching it up. Poetry makes nothing happen. Politically committed artists like Gabriel García Márquez give honest voice to their political passion at no great cost to the quality control of their art. But do they really change the world? I doubt it, I doubt it, Abraham Lincoln's remark to Harriet Beecher Stowe notwithstanding: "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that made this great war!" Well, she didn't. No: without sounding too terribly decadent about it, I much prefer the late Vladimir Nabokov's remark about what he wanted from his novels: "aesthetic bliss." Well, that *does* sound too decadent. Let me change masters for a moment and say that I prefer Henry James' remark that the first obligation of the writer—which I would also regard as his last obligation—is to be interesting, *to be interesting*. To be interesting in one beautiful sentence after another. To be interesting; not to change the world.

INTERVIEWER

I've always liked that exchange between William Gass and John Gardner in which Gardner said he wanted everyone to love his books and Gass replied that he wouldn't want everyone to love his books anymore than he would want everyone to love his sister or his daughter. Which side do you come down on?

BARTH

Gass accused the late Mr. Gardner with confusing love and promiscuity, which are not the same thing. Well, I am congenitally and temperamentally a novelist. The novel has its roots, very honorably, in the pop culture. The art novel notwithstanding, I think most of us novelists have a sneaking wish that we could have it both ways, as Charles Dickens did and as Gabriel García Márquez sort of does—to write novels that are both shatteringly beautiful and at the same time popular. Not to make a lot of money, but so that you can reach out and touch the hearts—no, that sounds hokey, doesn't it? But it is what most

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novelists wish they could do—reach out a little bit beyond that audience of professional readers, those really devoted followers of contemporary fiction. That's a navigational star that I confess I steer by. But I am, in fact, an amateur sailor and therefore an amateur navigator; I don't confuse my navigational stars with my destination. No novel of mine has had that kind of popularity, and I don't expect any novel of mine ever shall. But it's a good piece of fortune when it happens. I think of the novel as being an essentially American genre in this way—I'm not talking about *American* novels, but American in a metaphorical sense: hospitable to immigrants and amateurs. My favorite literature is both of stunning literary quality and democractic of access. This is not to mean I have a secret wish to be my Chesapeake neighbor, James Michener.

INTERVIEWER

Would you ever make a compromise in your books to gain more readers?

BARTH

I would, but I can't. I start every new project saying, "This one's going to be simple, this one's going to be simple." It never turns out to be. My imagination evidently delights in complexity for its own sake. Much of life, after all, and much of what we admire is essentially complex. For a temperament such as mine, the hardest job in the world—the most *complicated* task in the world—is to become simpler. There are writers whose gift is to make terribly complicated things simple. But I know my gift is the reverse: to take relatively simple things and complicate them to the point of madness. But there you are: one learns who one is, and it is at one's peril that one attempts to become someone else.

INTERVIEWER

Do your children enjoy your books?

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BARTH

I have no idea whether those rascals read them. I think they sneaked them when they were teenagers, but they've grown up to be scientists and business types. I think they're happy that their daddy writes things that have a certain heft. But do they read them? I don't know. When we finish our conversation I'll call them up one at a time and ask them.

—George Plimpton

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Barbara Wuest

Mass

Opening
In the name of one more leavening
I hoist the flag, the closed eye
of the letter *B* in cursive here.

I go to the sidewalk of losses.
In jeans and corduroy jacket, I walk
the way I imagine my father did
in shoes that touch down at intervals
whose useful hesitations I can't deny.

Confiteor
I confess I want a child this morning
because I'm homesick for my father,
for my mother who phones me her life
and for me most of all as a daughter.
Distanced by death, by miles, indelibly
inscribed in a place that is real:
Ida May, West Virginia, Marion County,
on a date that is real: October 7, 1946.
I've been seized by the pause wedged in
between myself as remains and remaining.

Kyrie
A hum from the pause tries to center here.
Mercy is flesh made flesh made flesh.
A hum from the pause tries to center here.

Gloria
Innocence gathered during the night
lifts its palms in the tarnished glow

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the going casts. It's the new sameness
I can count on: my God, the window
frames a flood of leaves so green
they seem to cry, "Here we are.
Nothing to come after. No promise."
And the glory's in the memory I take
to Manhattan where I find myself
staring at another morning and window.
Black fire escapes zigzag down the brick
sides of buildings laden with soot.
A jackhammer shakes its way to the earth,
and the window spreads before me
something so closed it opens on *you*
with all the fervor of a choir's *alleluia.*

Prayer
From this petitioner's lips, falling
desires repetition, trips against time.
I don't want to see the next hour's line
circle the numbers while I scoop
this hole in the dirt looking for root-hairs
withering under the anxious feet of the space-age.

Epistle
People lead me from this cloistered
corrosion my skin breeds alone.
My need bleeds the swellings
I acquire in the spaces stock-
still and throbbing for the door.
This moldy retreat resolves questions
into answers asking to be watered,
dissolves yesterday to a brown
scum from which Nothing pokes
its pure head crying with pride.
The lesson learned with high regard
for the emptiness necessary to get
full, I proceed mixing what is.

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Gospel
At that time the female child
aroused the possibilities in small
purple petals against the masses
of green she inched her hands through.
Day after day she baked clay bread
in pans she could see her eyes deepen in.
But the clay never rose under the sun.
Flat and red, it stayed as it was
until the summer's rain caused its
slick face to surface and shine.
When the sun came out again, lines
of blue, yellow and pink emanated
from the clay over hills she still climbs.
So she fed her imaginary children
on the dirty, the eternal clay bread.

Credo
I believe in sons and daughters going
through the cities' turnstiles, through
the ivy archways of small, quiet towns,
some staying like stray pollen, others
leaving with their luggage full of failure
and maps to places it might not be.
I believe the striations in the sky after rain
call the least of us to flights
we don't have wings enough to make.
And that we all end up in our own
closets of guilty self-respect whether
forced to land on cement or open field.
When the subway roars under my feet
I know my own blood bullets through me
with that same rage to get somewhere.
And I believe the heat from this speed
means at least you're alive, for now,
and at least I'm disturbed beyond
my perfect cycle, my song, at least.

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Offertory
The palms lifted before in glory
reach up again and wave the fragrant
branch of an old locust tree
through the vacant air I plow
by walking and breathing,
accepting the worms I turn over.

Lavabo
I wash nothing from this body.
Dust from a day's work, the impeccable
grime from a night's love, stay with me.

Preface
It's justice we need to clean,
not bodies shouldering bruised souls.
Justice is a wooden peach crate
rotting under the weight of wild grapes,
the right of a hand to fondle there,
to absorb stains as enduring as birthmarks.
It is right to banjo victorious chords
when the mere smell of baking grain
lures missile-planting leaders away
from the memories of wars where glory
never belonged, where purple decorations
displayed honor in its ugliest guise.
And to rustle the residue of song
settled like arid leaves in living throats,
to bear the struggles discord
makes always on its way to the chime:

Sanctus
Rainwash, rainwash, rainwash—
a child stands on the walkway,
head back, her tongue stretched
out and down like a thick leaf.
As she drinks, the rain slides

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softly over her bangs and brows,
hesitates, as if it knows her.

Prayer for the Church
Someone praises and a church is built.
I watch myself stroll past the mirrored
walls of the Cathedral in Garden Grove.
The building is bigger than the trees
whose growth seems to have stopped
in the face of a different grandeur.
Reflection makes murals of the drama
the commonplace never knew it was.
A church is built because someone does.

Commemoration of the Living
As a daughter of a country which is
the daughter of all countries, I have
memories woven with silk and bamboo,
satin and flax, and fibers from seaweed
washed here by zephyrs and furious gales.
The cloth covers the shoulders and arms
of Vivian, LeRoy, William, Sandra,
Paulette, Phillip, Stephen, Glen,
Deborah, Robert, Michelle, David,
Kelly, Anne, Linda, Mary, Paul,
Sherry, Joseph, Stella, Lori, Harriet,
Vera, Charles and the Rescuer James.

Consecration of the Bread and Wine
No finger or palm closes the same way
in a fist, the learned reflex of the restless.
The clutched darkness falls out of itself
when the hand opens in the jolting presence

Of Faces Lifted Toward Faces.

From the corners of the crowd's eyes
water flows as slowly and discreetly

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as dew on a grass-blade when the only light
to see it by glimmers from a lightning bug.
It flutters like a struck nerve

Above Tears Trickling
Over Capillary Vines
Tangled Beneath Skin
So Thin We Begin
To See What We Feel
With Our Eyes Closed.

Commemoration of the Dead
The unborn reach forward, the dead back.
Their arms form *X*'s, so many sutures
holding in death as it knocks
an endless variation of rhythms
from the rooms of each solitary heart.
Crossed arms of the holy ones,
guard the gasps and sighs, the push-
pull the living can't live without.
Crossed arms of the holy ones,
on your precious mark, get set,
stay, stay, stay, stay, stay.

Agnus Dei
Yellowed by the sun's wise love,
the eyebrows of the elderly curl
into fleece too thick to be used.

Yellowed by the sun's wise love,
the eyebrows of the elderly curl
into fleece too thick to be used.

My finger follows the soft sculptures
of hair above lids beautifully drooped
over gifts polished with time, prepared.

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Communion
If you doubt the tear is the wine,
the cheek the bread, then close your eyes
and kiss the skin where the tear stops.
Think on the taste of what you feel.

Post-Communion
Afterwards, feel for a bare spot in the grass
and write your name so deep you can't tell
if you're carving it in or digging it up.

Final Prayer
May any commingling produced
by the loops and curves of this mass
add to the peopled search.
Let it live in its own beaker, let it be
juice enough to sit alongside
the beaker from which it came.
Let it remain there until someone comes
along again with a need to
weed around the tombstone.

Blessing
May the walker who hangs his head
discover the signature just beyond
the eyelash that dips in order
to climb, to thin out of sight.
May he take the dust and grime
as he leaves on the tenuous wing
of the small letter *a*, his stain.

Closing Hymn
Look up through the grove of locust trees
where the frail johnny-jump-ups glow.

Pause near the hill before you climb.

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The sun's a large yolk ready to burst over
the graveyard gray at the top of the hill.

Hum half-way through the morning rise.

Lean on a tree trunk to rest and stroke
the leaves lined up on a hanging branch.

Look down as you go at the purple and green.

Watch the sun and shade play around your feet
and feel between the blades for the soil.

Lie down where it lures you, breast to grass.

Press your nipples in the nestlike tufts
and stay there awhile, burrow way down,

swell to your worth and hold it there.

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A Body Tends to Shine

Allan Gurganus

I

On dairy cream nowadays, they write "Best if used before . . ." Well, honey, my last safe-fresh year was, oh, around nineteen and fifty-one. But here I am—still propped up in bed, still cross and talking. Oh, I know how brown time has turned me. Old filbert face. Nurses here hate it when I run myself down. They scold me like they're sticking up for a child what can't protect itself. I just laugh. Back of these cataracts, I've got some good stuff saved. I'm only vain about my memory. But concerning that, I'm Mrs. Got-Rocks Stuck-Up. Fronts of my eyes might've whited over like a Frigidaire's double doors—but what's locked behind stays crisp and cool. Lately, my blue-plate-leftover-special is the perfect troubled summer of nineteen and ten.

My children would gobble any bright thing. Whatever shined, our babies ate it. They took light to be a type of snack. I warned them, "All that glitters is not food." But gulp, then here they'd come running to me, crying. One June day in nineteen-aught-ten here's Lou, my plump oldest girl, holding

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the hand of our next-to-youngest child. "Tell her," Louisa orders the baby sister. "Tell Momma what you ate now, Pig Breath."

I bow from the waist, I quiz Baby: *has* she swallowed something? (A nod.) Please describe the missing item.

"It . . . siney," Baby explains. "Siney" was her favorite word that summer.

Lou, bored, age nine, bossy by nature, rolls her eyes, "We *think* it means 'shiny'."

I give Louisa the glare. "Listen, you, we're lucky our Baby here can talk. Just pipe down, Miss Mouth."

"Darling," now I'm on my knees before Baby. "Look at me. Look at Momma. Lead Momma to where Baby found whatever Baby put down Baby's throat."

Then it happens: my child, my five year old, our prettiest, points to my third finger, to a callus, the brown married-life groove that shows what's missing. I glance at the drainboard where I left it.

"*You ate Momma's diamond ring.*"

Baby nods a whole lot, ninety fat curls jostle. She gets real big-eyed, she gulps as a test then points to one side of a neck banded with chubby folds. Next the fingertip slides lower, lower, clear down to her breastbone's top. "It . . . tickle . . . Baby." Hoarse, she keeps us posted.

"Does it hurt you, Pumpkin?" I shake her by the shoulders. "Tell Momma how it feels, *tell* me."

Baby smacks her lips, tasting. Baby looks off to one side, concentrating. Finally Baby reports, "It feel . . . siney."

Seems like Baby swallowed my finger and the finger is crooking itself inside her, signaling, hoping to be noticed and called back. Finally, Baby sobs. I'd been expecting that. Her yellow curls, her jumper with its animal-cracker smocking, her pearly nose, the pinkness otherwise—poor beautiful Baby. She's not my youngest no more—but she'll never stop being called Baby—by us, the neighbors, and all Falls, N.C.

"Are you still *married*?" Louisa is tugging at my apron. Lou can drive you absolutely crazy. Now she bolts off, a hefty interested child, to tell brothers and sisters: Baby has swallowed

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their parents' being married. I half-believe her. I'm that tired. I feel illegal and alone. My husband travels with his business. Like lots of young mothers left at home with kids—I speak to my children like they're the grownups, I talk to adults like they're my kids.—Too, I'm swallowing mouthfuls of iron pills for anemia. Seven children, no outside help.

Luckily, my particular seven interest me. Few dull moments hereabouts. I now promise my weepy one that everything'll be fine. She'll see. "Whatever goes in has got to come out. Understand, Baby?" The poor child pries open her mouth, stuffs many dimpled fingers down her throat. Quick, I stop her. "No, the other end, darling. We'll wait. It takes a while. Let's play like Baby is a River and, say, we dropped something into one part, then we could fish it out when it floated upstream (or is it downstream?)—anyhow, you see?—not to worry. We'll check on everything you . . . on all your little . . . you can use a whole separate potty and you'll bring it to Momma everytime, okay?—Now, ain't this going to be fun? The pot will be your own special one, and nobody else can have the use of it. You catching the drift here, Peachness?"

"Yeth," says Baby in babytalk. "I a river."

"Correct." Still on my knees, I waddle toward the cabinets underneath our kitchen sink. My burnt and bent pans always end up here last thing before they hit the garbage. Here's an old white enamel saucepan, red-rimmed, chipped with deep black flecks like worrisome moles. It was amongst my wedding gifts, some centuries before. Used to be my favorite all-time pan. I know I'm sacrificing it forever.

I hope to get Baby excited about this, like a project, see? When she acts calmer, studying her own personal pot, wearing it as a hat, trying to squint into its hollow handle, I question her. In my lightest not-to-worry voice, "Tell Momma why you swallowed Momma's engagement ring, Honey Dimple. What . . .?" (I almost say "attracted you to it," but that sounds pretty dumb—so I wait.) "Just . . . why?" I grin. She must not feel judged. Baby acts like some famous opera singer answering reporters on the deck of an ocean-liner.

" 'Cause . . . it . . . siney."

"Siney, yes," I say. " 'Shiny.' "

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Outside, my older children sing how Baby's done gulped down the bride and groom, how this couple's kids will all stay orphans till the bridal team squirms free again. Then certain brats chant:

"We know where *they'll* come out,
We know where *they'll* come out."

I yowl for kids to shush this very instant. Cherishing her new toy, holding it by the red handle before her face like a personal handmirror, Baby hears their teasing. She dreads the neighbors' knowing. Baby stands here dripping tears. Her face, heart-shaped, curdles.

"Say 'shiny,' " I coo to get her mind off what lays ahead. "Say it."

"Shiny," she tries. "That mean 'siney.' "

"Yeah," I smile at her. "Go sit on the pot."

II

She did. The poor thing couldn't budge from it, for guilt feelings. I asked a favor of an older neighbor girl: please run to Kress's. I wanted to ease Baby's mind. I ordered myself a ten-cent ring with a clear glass rock about as big as an acorn. Rhinestones are tacky, yeah—but the sunshine they trap inside theirselves ain't no different than a diamond's daylight.

For baby, I modeled the flashy thing. Poor child already wore a pressed-looking face, like she was straining while just walking around. "See?" I acted Lady Bright. "No hurry. Momma has got lots of rings, Tulip. You only ate one. Things take care of theirselves. Just be natural and live like usual. It'll happen."

This Kress's ring was way too small. It cut right bad. I wore it full-time anyhow. Maybe it'd help my Baby to relax. I showed it off, smiling.

"That's not your *real* ring." Louisa, our eldest girl, can be right whiney when she puts her mind to it. "You're nobody's wife now," Lou points at me, using her left braid's tip. "Or maybe you're just the wife of Baby's Stomach. I bet it's fake. Yeah, that's probably just a one-cent *toy* ring."

"Will . . . You . . . Shut . . . Up?" I mouth across the kitchen

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but our darling, hurt, dashes screeching down the hall. Then—timid—Baby scuffs back, grabs up Pottie. (She's made a pet of it. In her loneliness, she's named it "Mr. Pottie.") Baby pouts off, shy and wronged. She turns back and, full of self-pity, even for her—the child puffs, hugging the saucepan even nearer, "Baby's onwy fwend."

It about breaks my heart. It does.

She swallowed my ring at a bad time—but then it's always a bad time, you know? Still, I was bushed just then. My husband stayed gone weeks at a sweep, selling livestock. Kept gallivanting off, jawing with other Civil War vets about the happy bloody olden times. He left me high and dry in the gory present. A family doctor had explained: My body lacked so much iron, I could eat our entire eight-burner Wedgewood cookstove and still not break even.

Was one of them moments: I'd finally get the children all pyjamaed, watered, tucked in and storied out. Coming down the stairs at last, I'd settle on our landing's windowseat just for a second so's I could rub my lower back, just so I could look out on a sidewalk clogged with family trikes, bikes, scooters.

In them years, at such a time of night, you never heard one sound you couldn't name. The Maxwells' collie and their chow-chow stirred each other up, barking over nothing. The Orange Blossom Special, two minutes fast, outraced its whistle. (That's how long ago this happened: some trains ran early!) Doc Collier's buggy creaked on home, he'd delivered twins to a tenant farmer's wife weeks overdue. Wind in the trees—you knew whose elms and which direction the breeze came from and what it meant for tomorrow's weather. A nod later, still slumped in the window seat, I reopen eyeballs: on morning and, already, my children nearabout late for school. What kind of mother is that? Eight hours' sleep was just a blink in the bucket of my swarming backlog. So—this here ring thing seemed the straw that broke the spine, meaning my own.

But—as will happen—Lord Be Praised—disasters can often interest you the most. They make you feel like a Sherlock, hired to solve your own sad case. They perk a person up and prove to you that World Drama is basically a homebody.

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Tell me: How do you usually get your valuable rings out of *your* Baby's sweet gullet?

I don't plan to make you ill with the crudest details of my ring-search. Let's just say: Motherhood! Let's say I borrowed many old newspapers from the neighbors. These unmarried people hoarded papers for just such family emergencies. But, not having no families, they lent their bounty to us instead. Seemed our house stirred up troubles enough to keep a radio soap show in daily episodes forever. Times, it felt like I had more problems than Dick Tracy. I asked neighbors not to tell the ring news to our well-meaning pharmacist, the human P.A. system. Folks agreed but grilled me.

Why she swallow *that*?, they had every right to ask and, of course, each did. "Because," I admitted, "it was siney . . . shiny. That's all Baby'll say. I just slipped it off whilst washing dishes. Always do, scared I might otherwise lose it down the drain."

"It surely seems that's precisely what's occurred here," one old bachelor smiled. (Those non-parents can really Monday-morning-quarterback your life for you!)

"Yeah," I fought sounding surly. "Yeah, sir, it's a drain, okay.—But the human body is the one drain that gives back. You wait. Just watch." Then I remembered to thank him for his extra *Herald Travelers*.

"See you in the Funny Papers," he hollered after me. It was something people said then but, that day, I took it personal.

III

I fed my lover of shininess prunes. Many stewed prunes. I whispered it'd be Baby's secret food. She asked me to eat some too. "Baby feel so . . . only," she confessed. (She meant "lonely.") Baby acted scared these prunes was poison. So I gobbled the same number, matched her prune for prune—and paid for it afterwards. Seemed the least I could do.

I begged our other children not to tease her. And they tried. Kids fought not to giggle but it struck them as funny. Oftimes, it did me too. But I could not let on. —I worried I'd mess Baby up. I pictured Baby—years later—in the office of some counselor or social worker, certificates paving his walls,

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and Baby's mouth near his face, telling him the many mistakes I'd made. I imagined him going, loud, "She did *what*!"

No, I wanted to behave right. I mostly do. Odd, nobody much speaks of how hard we all try and be clever at not hurting others. That's so much of every day in the world. And yet, it's only the wars and muggers that get wrote up. How do you figure it? Stories of real-life kindness stay left out every time. (This one's bound to be lost. I mean, how minor can you get? One ring, a woman running a sidestreet house in a town whose Main Street won't within a hundred miles of the beaten track.) Meaning: I thank you for listening so far and hope you'll stay and see how it all turns out. Soon comes lunch. They'll be wheeling in the chair that fetches me to Thursday's Chicken-à-la-King, never my favorite.—Meanwhile, Baby dragged to her room, whimpering. I listened from the hall, not wanting to seem pushy. Mostly I felt glad my stone was pear-shaped and not one of them spiky claw-and-ball ones you see. The gem had been my husband's own rich momma's. White gold, her initials and some Latin engraved inside of it. I pictured the strict old lady, hearing of her jewel's damp whereabouts. I saw her spinning—like a woodlathe—in her grave.

What'd helped to smooth my ring? What'd made it a safer passenger through Baby? The wear and tear of years of household days. Why, just my taking it off every night to do our dishes, just my popping it back on, finger soapy afterwards—that'd whittled extra harm and angles off of it, that'd sent it—without a hitch—on its tour of tender vitals. There's some justice: Effort is streamlining!

Late evenings, with the wee ones finally in bed, my man counties away, me alone downstairs and pretending to read (just to prove I'd had a chance) I sat thinking of my absentee diamond. My thumb and little finger kept reaching for their pet and sidekick. In stores, I'd commenced studying other ladies' rocks. None came near comparing to the shine of what I'd lost.

My ring—a minus—made me recollect my own small circle of history: Me, a fifteen-year-old kid being offered that fine gem whilst seated in my Momma's garden one autumn night. The moon was a witness as blue and white as the ring which

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moonlight lit. My breath came and went with his—one mixed huff and curl—blue-white as a full moon shrunken to one carat's size. The moon proposed. The face-up diamond blinked, "I do."— —Or, how, left alone in my husband's large house before our first baby (Louisa) dropped into view, I would wander the place, bored silly, a child myself, that ring held up before one open eye. I'd be bumping into walls, seeing corridors and furniture through my good-sized rock—squinting at twelve versions of every andiron and fern. It was like, needing company, I made my husband's house flash into a dozen nervous copies of itself—my practice family.— —How, though they shaved me everywhichaway for my seventh child's birthing, nobody thought to take the ring off me. And during the worst of a bossy doctor's, "push, push," my stone someway got turned around and trapped inside my red fist, got mashed so hard into the center of my palm that, afterwards, it looked to be one nailhole bruised there.

I now sat downstairs, alone, a novel open in my lap. (I'd been faking reading this same book for a year and a half.) I sat—my right hand's thumb and index finger busy being the left one's departed ring. It got so I missed that diamond, like on the very worst days—you feel you've someway missed out on your whole life.

IV

Seeing how low she'd sunk, I started calling Baby, "Momma's Favorite Safe Deposit Vault." I told her to look on the bright side: If a robber jumped us, he'd never find the most valuable thing that Momma owned. Baby barely smiled—she was usually a genius at pleasing—too much of one. (She'd been caught curtseying to mules downtown.) She half-grinned, but later I found her eating whole handfuls of salt, trying to make herself sick and lose it. I carried her around the house then, rocking the poor thing, saying, "Trust time, Sugarbeet. Time will bring us what we want. You wait and see."

Did I mention it was nineteen and ten? Honey, that was one of our last safe years, ever. This mousetrap of a century waited up ahead of us—a whole miniature golf course of pits, traps,

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rapids, mines. "Trust it," I told my next-to-youngest. "Time is—like everybody says—a big nice river, sort of. And we can all float."

"But Momma," she frowned in my arms. "You told Baby *Baby* was a river." (She was like what they claimed of Teddy Roosevelt, "He wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral.")

"Okay, fine. Go ahead and be one. I reckon there's always room for another decent river." That calmed her. I told Baby to trust time. So she did, poor thing. She would become an actress, she would begin succeeding when she died at thirty-one. They called her "Baby" to the end. "Trust time," I kept telling her. What choice do we have?

Then I gave her a lid for the saucepan. Nothing had happened. I wanted to nudge her memory. "It's named Mr. Pottie," Baby reminded me. "And his lid's name will be . . . Miss Lydia."

"Fine," I smiled, and hoped. Soon Baby brought me Miss Lydia tight in her place on top. Grinning, Baby looked worn but proud. "Thank you, Sweetpea. Momma's pleased." I grabbed my second-best yardstick, snatched up many a newspaper. Lugging pot and Lydia, I bolted our bathroom door and spread the Business Section in the tub. It was all I could think of. I'll spare you the rank facts of my long, long search.

To think back, seems like it took weeks, whole Sunday *Herald Travelers*. My one wish ("Seek and ye shall find") used up all the Want Ads. I didn't usually have time to read a daily paper, nor even a Sunday one. But now I let myself get hooked on little human interest items off along the edge. Hadn't seen a funny paper for years. I spared the Funnies—kept them back for myself. I was usually so busy trying to save everything and everybody else—just to squirrel aside Mutt and Jeff for a midnight read seemed sinful. Which shows you, child, how far off course things'd drifted. Only now, with me nigh onto a hundred, with me alert in my last leisure—with my whole family missing, only here recent do I have hours on end for telling tales to cornered strangers. I can nap when I please. I got no chores left. Except to concentrate on staying alive another day. The *Herald Traveler* promised to send a photographer over if I hang on till my Hundredth. That keeps me interested. I ain't

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been in the paper since a flattering wedding picture taken in nineteen aught aught. (The veil was down.) My nurses pull for me. One pretty one is pregnant and I want to stick around and see if it's a boy or girl.

Nowadays people let me be. It's nice but I miss work. I still can't believe my young ones are gone. Every one, and of what? Natural causes, mostly. Even Louisa, the practical nurse, she went like the rest—her medical knowledge no help. Times, I pretend *they're* the missing diamonds trapped for a short while in something's dark intestine. They're all lined up, ready for a comeback in the light. Their characters yet seem so stubborn, real and hard-cut to me. Permanent. Makes me think of these ads you hear: "Diamonds Are Forever." What if my brood is still hid, safe in some spot that's body-temperature exactly? Of course, I know better. Still, you hope.

Anyhoo—my older children took to camping outside that bathroom window, listening and laughing when they heard me start to rustle newspapers. Lou, standing on a apple crate like some carny barker, hung out there lording it over neighborkids. A rounder, that child. But I could tell: Her gloomy imagination, like my own, had been kind of snagged by the human interest angle of Baby's stem-to-stern ring toss. Louisa (named for the author of *Little Women*) usually behaved herself. She would help me around the house—but the child always grew rangy during disturbances. Now she stood outdoors, eavesdropping on our brick home, tucked behind bushes, telling others, "I bet Momma finds a real pearl, too—one worth about . . . six thousand and something dollars. Nobody's missed it yet but it's in there okay. And I bet Momma finds the good red cat-eye shooter marble I lost when I was around Baby's age, way long ago. I bet. . . ."

Ned, her younger brother, said, dreamy as ever, "She will find . . . a whole cocker spaniel puppy in it, alive."

Then Lou asked little visitors what *they* hoped for.

I hollered till I felt dizzy, "Go away. Life is hard enough." Besides, I suspected that Miss Louisa had been charging neighborkids admission, two pennies apiece to stand out there, listening, picturing, wishing.

Growing famous, poor Baby kept to her bedroom, burrowed

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under quilts, the shades drawn, ashamed like a little plague victim. She would rest, face up, thick lashes mashed tight, one hand rubbing her tummy, another testing her forehead. Mr. Pottie and Miss Lydia sat on a chair a piece nearby. They waited like two interested cats. To her own lower body, my poor blond child kept muttering, "Hurry, O Hurry."

Three meals a day, we all waited, trying not to seem to wait. We watched her chew. Unwed neighbors, the non-parents who'd loaned us *Herald Travelers*, strolled over and, half-smirking, asked, "How'd it come out?" "T'ain't funny," I'd squint. That old bachelor sure burned me up, going, "So, is our silk purse free of the sow's ear yet?" Fists locked on hips, I snapped, "I sure see why *you* never married. You know nothing of a lady's body's finer points. For your information, sir, it's *all* silk purse."

Most of Falls, N.C., aisle to aisle at Joe's All-Round-Store, at Philby's Pharmaceutical Needs, pumped me for nastier details of my ring hunt. I crossed my arms. No way would I betray my darling. As I looked and looked for the family jewel, my search's background—the daily paper—seemed to bulge with one word. "Ring." (There must be a name for that—how, once you find some fact or notice a phrase—the earth just rushes forward to show you how often it's been right there under your nose.) "Ringleader Confesses." "The Raleigh Opera Society hopes to do—one work at a time—the entire Ring in the next six years." "Prostitution Ring Exposed." "Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey's four ring extravaganza opens."—I commenced believing: *Soon, everything I'd ever missed would be returned to me. With interest.*

V

Nights, I started picturing it in there.

Just as I dozed off, I'd be drifting in that half-life state that's often smarter than my daylight best. Then the jewel came clear to me as in some x-ray. I knew exactly where, inside of Baby, my solitaire had rested for the night. In darkness the exact size of my child, it winked. Sometimes, when I'm upset, I'll twist the ring around and round, hardly thinking. It now seemed

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to do that on its own—lonely inside Baby, 'only' inside Baby. I'd snooze and make up crazy thoughts (or, no, they'd make up me):

How, say, the ring's clear stone is really an eye, see? Faceted for storing every sight. Each facet is like another angle in its high I.Q. The gold band behind this eye is the circling skull that holds the eyeball steady, that saves up memories of things it sees. Then I let myself imagine what-all it was getting to view, for free, right now, as Baby breathed just across the room (I'd moved into the nursery, she was scared of sleeping alone with It in her). Easy to picture the ring's total voyage. A Cook's Tour, it tours where this cook's own cooking tours, breakfast to dinner. I see my prettiest child's interior views. Here's a canoe's rocking route: it passes through great pink caves, blue arenas, slick and necessary tunnels of love, sluice-gates, sewers of museum beauty. On a floating pleasure cruise, the diamond swims, inching through a whole coiled map of rivers. It swims so slow because it really likes it in here. A year-round 98.6 degrees—the Florida of my infant's health. —But, wait, what if snagged somewheres inside of Baby, what if it chose a spot, settled down, started gaining carats month-by-month? My own five-year-old will carry it full-term. Newspaper reporters wait near Baby's favorite swingset, hoping for interviews. Finally, I've told her what to expect. I hold her hand, I go, "Push, Baby." Out slides a gem big as a goodly coal chunk—hot ice shoots into the rubber hands of waiting Swiss doctors. Over their surgery masks, they wear dark glasses so's they can bear to look onto such brightness. "Never in all our years," they say. Headlines in the *Herald Traveler* and other world papers:

SUDDENLY FAMOUS TOT BRINGS FORTH
HOPE DIAMOND, ONLY QUADRUPLED
Authorities Mystified

These were my odd selfish thoughts whilst half-asleep. Maybe I was going partway crazy. My child's medical glamor was running away with me. But, honey, even wide awake, this much I understood: No painted picture, no treaty, nobody's genius

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can compare with the wonders one ring might be privileged to glimpse on its ride through a regular baby's ordinary digestion.

You know, right often, the body is the best thing we've got going for us. A body itself is a shiny object. Something!

VI

"Let's make this accident a mite more educational," I told myself and then the kids, my conversation's usual echo. I bossed Lou and Ned into looking under *D* in their school encyclopedias. "I want A+ oral reports," says I. Even neighborkids gathered. For all I knew, Lou charged them for the honor. She cleared her throat, announcing that Compton's claimed: It takes your sifting six tons of ore to find one pound of jewels. "Like life!" goes I. "Imagine." And they all did, I could feel them—the echo again. Then Ned quoted World Book: how famous diamond-cutters, at day's end, will gather their floorsweepings and burn these to make sure no stray carat gets chucked out with the daily dust. "Fancy that," I shake my head. "Fire means nothing to them. They eat it for breakfast. —But, wait, where's Baby herself? *She* should be here."

Only then did we notice: Nobody's heard the usual pacing, not a sniffle since her breakfast of hot prune juice and bran. We found her nursery door locked. I sent Lou around to shinny up the drainpipe. Lou came across a plug of Baby's best crinoline, ripped and flying from our gutter's metal cross-brace. Once inside Baby's room, we saw she'd taken Mr. Pottie and Miss Lydia. One of the twins mumbled to herself, "Uh-oh, the dish run away with the spoon." Baby'd hit the road.

Louisa knew where we all filed our secrets. She rushed right to her sister's sock drawer and announced that the savings passbook was missing. (My husband had started all our children with five-dollar accounts. Most soon whittled deep into their capital, owing to excess candy purchases). Not Baby! She deposited a few coins each week. We never knew how she earned a cent. Whenever Baby turned up at the bank with her white calfskin handbag clutched before her, the head teller, a maiden lady, made much over our thrifty Dumpling.

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Now our diamond reading-group rushed downtown to People's and Farmers' First Federal. Miss Pritchard, the head teller, smiled her best savings-account grin. (She had no checking anywheres in her—a young woman already far too willing to start being old.)

"Well, well. We understand your second youngest is heading for Hollywood, California, to be a moving-picture star. She even had her cooking gear along."

"Of course," I tried to sound in charge for once (though my honor guard of kids gave me judging looks). "And when did our famous one take off for points west?—Look, Miss Pritchard, tell me how much my child had stashed with you all. What might Baby's nest egg total, please?"

"That," Miss Pritchard, bun in a snood, eyeglasses on a black cord, pencil held by a silver chain, brass sweaterguard preventing any wind or vandal from getting her black cardigan even two inches out of place, "is confidential. Bank policy, alas."

I turned to leave—ain't no arguing with such rule-book souls. (Not five years later, she'd be stretched out here on the marble floor of People's and Farmers' after trying to stop a hold-up, after bodyblocking some drunk man what grabbed sixty-one dollars, a drunk that our duty-proud unfairly-unloved Miss Pritchard *forced forced forced* to shoot her). But today she stopped me, one touch on my shoulder. She whispered she'd lift up a certain number of fingers. I'd draw my own conclusions about *what* she was signaling, okay? That way, see, she wouldn't compromise a soul. Soon as she broke a rule for me, I liked her very much. The more you love the law, the more you love the ones that break it right. We all cried at her funeral.

By the time Miss Pritchard, using both her ringless hands, poked up fingers totaling thirty-two, I felt ready to call in the state police. I pictured my poor Baby, footloose, full of jewel, headed west towards stardom. How does an unemployed five-year-old earn that kind of money? Beside me, holding my right fist, squeezing it so the dime-store ring hurt me even more, freckled Louisa—a bit jealous but real worried. Lou gaped my way, eyes large, admitted: Each Saturday, Baby'd been bustling downtown—all starched and rosy. Then, on the sidewalk be-

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fore Robbins' Billiards Parlor (rough trade at its most lubricated) our Baby danced. For money.

"*Now* you tell me," I scold our eldest. "Eating diamonds, plus panhandling nickels off of sentimental drunks? —That child's got a future if we can catch her in time."

We rush past Philby's Drugs when Old Man Philby hisself hollers, "A certain hurrying young person purchased a lifetime supply of breathmints here not thirty minutes back, is all I'll say." So we check two country roads bound west. Find nothing. Then we scout the train depot, looking under each booth of the Ladies room, making enemies. Luckily, it being nineteen and ten, there weren't no aeroport yet, which saved us a trip.

Well, I had to go back home, had to settle at my own kitchen table before choosing what step to take next. I am one of those people that's no good whatever at hurrying, at deciding important things on the street amongst total strangers. My house was always like bifocals that jerk world-blur to something sharp and clean. (This "Home" I'm in, it ain't home. No wonder I can't see good.)

I'd settled at my kitchen table, sighing, debating between sending telegrams or screaming, when I notice this tiny gift-wrapped bundle near my right hand. I take the thing up, rip it open. I half-believe Baby herself might leap out of this four-inch casket. Here, slotted in its rich brown velvet case, I discover a ring—not my own, but a real gem—I'm not sure what type of stone it was—purplish, full of light, bound by a simple yellow-gold setting. At the bottom of the box, I find a price sticker (from Gehman's Jewelers of Distinction—locally, our best). "Thirty four dollars." I make a little cry and sprint upstairs. I find her doubled over in bed, sobbing.

"Your life savings," I shout. I test her for fever. "Your short life's total savings. No fair."

I explain, though the ring's beautiful—amazingly tasteful for a five-year-old to pick—we'll have to take it back. "And you're never to go spend any such amount on your Mother ever again, you understand me?" Baby confesses to her pillow, "It not nice as your one, Momma. I show the man the one I want. I put my finger on their big glass box. Baby point and point. But

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he look at all Baby's money, he say Baby can only have *that* one. Yours is better but . . . Baby ate. I point and point, Momma. They won't give me it. Baby feel so . . . only. All Baby's money not enough money, Momma."

"Don't," I say. We hold onto each other, blubbering while my family (and strangers' children) mill around watching us from the hall. Their eyes go narrow, their arms are crossed. Louisa circulates among them, collecting a few more pennies. For kids, this day has turned out even better than expected. Meaning: worse.

VII

Soon. It had to happen *soon.* I couldn't go on like this. When I seen just how low Baby's morale had slipped, I invented a trip for her, not to Hollywood but at least around town. We'd sock her money back into People's and Farmers'. We would do chores, just me and her, nobody else. The others begged to come. I let my child wear all four Sunday petticoats plus a little white sprigged hat from last Easter. Baby did love that hat. (Some five-year-olds are already as vain as any grownup ever gets. It's funny to see.)

Making a fuss over the poor child, I was halfway down our front walk, was holding Baby's spongy little hand when Louisa yells, running out the house. She's carrying Mr. Pottie and Miss Lydia, "You forgot you-all's fishing net." She jiggled these by the handle, like popping popcorn—forever the clown. But I saw that Louisa, left in charge here, was dead right. Away from home, it might happen. Anywhere, our golden moment.

In the drugstore, our old family pharmacist nodded towards my child, studied her—all gussied up and puff-sleeved. Baby held her pot and lid in that proud quiet way she has. "So, ladies," said white-haired Mr. Philby. "Covered dish supper at the church tonight?" That man had to know everything.

"No, sir," I saw my child flinch, scared I'd squeal on her. "Nope, let's say we're carrying around a family recipe." I winked at Baby, full of shine and secrets. She liked that. Philby was forever running "How Many Jellybeans In This Jar?" contests.

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He was a demon with his mortar and pestle, a mix master, mad for secrets.

"So," he looked up, "A dish made with some secret family ingredient, is it?"

"Yeah," I admitted, "Mr. Philby, this pot's kept aside, special-like, for . . . the secret ingredient all to itself. And you know what's odd? This particular ingredient's found in every American home. But nobody ever stops to consider it. The stuff is the opposite of attention-getting. —Oh, yeah, it's been in our family for years. Whole generations. Goes way back."

"Secret, hunh? Ingredient, is it?" We'd sure got our druggist interested. Baby and me pivoted to leave.

"Wait. I bet it's . . . baking soda," Philby hollered. I squinched up my nose: meaning a *No* answer. "Okay," he leaned over a display card of toenail clippers, "I'll go with . . . bay leaves!"

"Is he even warm, Baby? Tell our favorite druggist that much. No more." I hunkered down beside my darling and jewel.

Philby bribed her with some Mary Jane candy. Just one hint? Was the secret ingredient liquid or solid? Bigger than a breadbox? What color? Shrugging, the child acted bored but willing, "Baby gives him one teentsy hint—It siney!" I saw she hadn't understood. Just as well.

We dragged past the baseball park, bound home. It'd sure been a long long day and I felt this in that achy clock: the lower back. I was ready to admit—I'd lost my ring. I felt justified in acting extra-bitter for a week. What *good* is the world? That same second Baby starts the dancing. "Oh Lord." We just made it to a grim Ladies room behind the dugout. It was all gray cement, green mold, and lipstick on the mirrors. In my panic, I slipped Miss Lydia under Baby, then quick replaced it with Mr. Pottie proper. Both Baby and me heard something, metal, loud, go clank. Sounded like it weighed eight pounds easy. A red-faced Baby grinned. A red-faced Baby laughed, then, pale-faced, cried and cried. I clamped Miss Lydia on, real tight. Finally semihappy—with results warm before us at my wrist's far end—the child and me marched home, hand in hand, arms swinging. The human body *is* the only drain that gives back all it's given . . . more!

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VIII

We decided to make a party out of our regaining everything. I offered Baby a lot of the credit (trying to build her up, don't you see. It's what we called "Just Good Psychology"). Soon as we hit the kitchen, I soaked that ring for four straight hours in a brew of ⅓ straight amonia bleach, ⅓ Oxydol soap (which could blister rowboat paint), plus ⅓ *scalding scalding scalding* water.

Pottie and Lydia got drowned in the same solution till their last red enamel flaked off. Baby was allowed to keep these utensils. By now they meant something to her. She took the clean Mr. Pottie outdoors and, planted Thumbelina zinnias and one Easter lily bulb in him. Settled on our back porch, she taped her pot with a sign she'd dictated to me: "Here It's Baby's Secret Garden. Keep Out or Pay." Miss Lydia waited alongside. Baby'd nested down betwixt them and—when I looked out my window over the sink—I saw her, arms Xed across her chest, face set, muttering—guarding friendly items like she'd heard the Kaiser's spies were to kidnap them. My second youngest stayed there—relieved, jumpy, proud—explaining things to herself till dinner.

Come mealtime, the twins waltz in with construction paper place cards shaped like big rings, tinfoil being the diamonds. "Such clever children. Whose *are* you!" I touch their heads. With my husband away like usual, I put out six Kress's candles—meaning, a special event. We will now celebrate the stone's homecoming.

My children all line up to study the now-famous ring. (Famous to us, at least.) "No pushing," says I. "There's plenty for everybody." I peel off my apron and settle. Ned pulls out the chair for me. News of my jewel's comeback should be in the *Herald Traveler* but, of course, it won't get mentioned noplace.

Soon as we've started on the corned beef and cabbage, Lou announces I can consider myself married again. I take off the rock then slip it back on. The twins hum "Here Comes The Bride." Looking around the candlelit table, it seems—for one second—like I had these children without any man's help. All

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solitary mothers must get these flashes. A willful woman's stubborn self-seeding—just another inside-job and daily chore. Of course, my wee ones look so much like him. I can never believe very long in my being a self-starter. Lou, especially, setting here beside me, shows her Pop's sober open mood of a face. Observing it all, believing but little.

Tonight, she droops, real sad. Slow, I understand that—in trying to keep my high-strung Baby calm during this upset, I've ignored my brightest if maybe plainest-looking child. Lou (an entire planet on tap betwixt her braids) usually behaves right well. Till she feels left out. Then, honey, you better hire somebody to watch her.

With my free hand, I find hers under our tablecloth. Lou's grip bites into my Kress's ring. I now slip that jewelry off, awarding it to her hand, in secret. (Oh, but kids respect secrets—everybody's trust fund). The rhinestone ring, too small for me, wobbles on Lou's knuckle. I bend its soft metal hoops to fit.

Now I show off my real diamond. "It ain't ever looked better," I say. "Will you all just study the fire in it?—like it's happy to be back. My ring means more to me than ever. Why, I'd quit noticing it. Now I'll never take it for granted again. Thank you, Baby. Really." Smiling, shy, Baby nods, accepts.

(Odd, I only said all that to make her feel better. But, in that way you do, of a sudden, I found I meant it.)

How lucky I am to have pretty-smart and really-healthy children, plus jewelry that comes back when nature, daylight, greed, and gravity all call.

Lou now stands, formal. Others have been nudging her, whispering.

"Okay," she sounds so serious it scares me. Under the cloth, she lets my hand fall free. I miss her heat. "Okay, I made up a poem that some people on our street have already memorized. *They* want me to say it," grinning, she points at brothers and sisters who cheer. Baby goes extra-still.

Myself, I do not particularly care to risk hearing Louisa's poesy. But—no matter what the topic of it—you cannot squelch a poem from your own child. Especially with candlelight at dinner and

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your husband out of town. So I say, "I'm sure yours is a very good one." We all wait. I tense some. I notice Baby fidgeting like hiccups looking for a home. Then Louisa clears her throat.

"Okay, I will now start it: A Poem About What Happened.

—Okay . . . No, not yet . . . Yeah, okay . . . Now:"

POEM

Baby at the sink, saw something "siney."
Baby ate it up, came out her hiney.
The End.

Three laughing children fall off chairs. Two chime their water-glasses. I turn quick to Baby. There's one second when, batting wet blue eyes, she's about to go screeching down our hall. Then—slow (it's hard for her and that makes me feel real proud)—she shrugs. She makes a Who-cares? mouth. Baby's already grown older!

It's like she's admitting: Louisa's poem is true. Which, though blunt, I reckon it mostly is. We all study Baby. Others crawl back onto furniture, they quiet some—waiting for a usual Baby conniption fit. But, knowing what we all expect, the child acts right dignified.

"So what?" says she. "Baby didn't know. And Baby not ashame. Look here," she points to my fine gem, unharmed by her body's best tries at making food of it.

To cover up my kids' earlier picking at each other (I just hate it when they do like that), I stand to clear their plates. Ned is asking, "What's for dessert?"

"Tonight, I've got you all a light dessert," I say. I shove my expensive worldly-wise diamond down towards Kress's candle flames. Gem light flings itself all over our dining room. My ring makes coleslaw of the rainbow. I shift my stone side-to-side like some smart salesgirl, demonstrating. Pearshape throws mild specks, bright watercolor dots, stripes, X's, a shortlived chandelier across walls, over my children's living faces, onto windowglass with night pressed black behind it.

Louisa, still standing, seems quieted by this show. She blinks then steps around my chair to Baby's. She tugs off the dime-

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store ring, grabs her sister's left hand and—moving bold as a groom that means it—shoves the jewel hard onto Baby's pudgy finger. Then Lou bends, tightening soft metal yet another notch.

"But," Baby lifts her right shoulder, tips her right cheek to it, dimples deepening.

"But . . . why . . . me, Weeza?" (Some folks' whole life is a fishing trip for compliments.)

"Because I'm the oldest is why." Lou, square-built, truth-telling, straightens. " 'Cause they expect me to and because you're such a . . . total . . . baby. Because you're our baby, Baby. You're all our 'Baby.' "

"Sanks," comes the answer. Our eldest sits. I resettle myself and find Lou's hand. I keep my ring held still on tabletop, hostess to light.

Then we see how other children have hopped up (No "May I be excused?" tonight). They run now, really chasing colors that keep beating with my pulse. Wallpaper takes on light as a project, meal, and spangle. Kids fling up their arms as eyes go animal wild. Twins jump to reach the really good spots, burning above the sideboard. Ned drags over a chair so he can climb quick and touch a circle. His head pokes into spotlight as he pretends to eat all brightness before it dies. Such noise in here. We're all laughing some. Kids trot around and round the table. Only Louisa, Baby, and yours truly are yet seated, watching. (I know: all that glitters is not gold. True too: All that glitters is not food. But, honey, all that glitters glitters. That is fact—like your body is a fact.)

Lou's grip tightens. My mouth swims to her nearest ear, "You been so good during this long wait, child. With Poppa gone so much, I depend on you. I overdo. And I know what being considered a strong person can cost a girl—You're so fine, Louisa."

"Not really," says she. "Thank you."

"What?" Baby slaps tabletop. "You all talk about Baby and talk about Baby. *Tell.*"

I can only offer her my elbow to hold—I've got to keep this ring hand in the middle. I aim my light just so and our dining room is a stained-glass window, chickenpoxed with happy tints. Such a noisy excellent madhouse we've got going here.

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That yellow near one wall sconce, it's the exact farewell yellow of a healing bruise. And—on the tinfoil of a place-card gem—coppery light flips itself to crib-quilt pink then turncoats to the greenery of seaweed, gills. Oh, sixty shades of blue. And, as I watch, my children—skipping through these broken plates of churchy light—change, bit by inch, into the silly saints. One diamond lays a million checkmarks on us all.

IX

Now that's over except the recollecting. Time has come and turned me this hickory-nut brown. Not that I was ever no front-page beauty—my face was Section C at best. Time's made a oversight in leaving me propped up here but, oh, it'll be back. Maybe a person is "best if used before . . ." but I'm still enjoying full sunlight and your softer foods.

Even so, some nights in this place, sleeps gets real hard. The world's grown noisier—these roars and booms and sirens you can't trace or figure. (Not like Falls then, when every slammed door was on a first-name basis with you.) Nowadays you hear traffic on the Interstate: and you yourself can't drive. You hear our new aeroport: and you were only ever on a plane the once. You lay in a bed that, within two days of your dying, will be another person's bed. You hear the world's static a-hissing and spitting right outside your window. You don't even need a wireless set to pick it up. Wired, you *are* one! —A person rests less and less at my age. It's one gentle way they get you ready. Finally you've grown so homesick for quiet and a good night's sleep—you'll throw yourself at Eternity just to enjoy them first eight restful hours of it.

Sometimes, trying to doze—that ring story will come back on me, like a rich food. Some nights, half asleep, I feel I've done become the thing. I tell myself: it's always been like that for me, lost and found. Maybe I'm a permanent stone washing through some darkness? But, to me, the blackness itself seems familiar, kind of personal—like it's the shadow zipped inside one of my babies. Seems like I helped to start the darkness where I'll end. I'm *one* of its Mothers, anyhow.—Other nights, I get to be a baby. But, some item that's supposed to be real valu-

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able (the world) has turned into a fishhook, has snagged—caught and killing—somewheres deep in me.

Now I have time for thinking up such silliness. Which is good.

Not two days ago, I was laying here at 10 A.M. full of French toast, recalling what the World Book said way-back-when: about the diamond-cutting district in Amsterdam, which is Holland. Come shop's closing time, the boss is naturally scared he'll throw out some lost chip of preciousness. So, he makes the evening cleaning ladies do this. They dump all their sweepings into a open metal pot. They set such gunk afire. Flames take care of paper scraps, burn the usual lint, scorch what threads and nameless crud will sift into the corners of any busy place by workday's end. Then, all the cleaning lady does, see, she pokes through them ashes. And sometimes—sure enough—there, still safe among black crackling soot, she'll find a few beautiful lost stones—blue-white brilliants—too pure to let fire bother them, gems stronger than the earth's best damage.

Honey, I now think: My life has been like this—the frying off of extras. And, whatever is left, whatever still shines in the hand—why, that's what I call Mine, darling. Them's the keepers.

I loved my children. My children are all gone.
I loved my ring. Here. . . . look. . . . I still have it.

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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

FICTION

Louise Erdrich received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction in 1984 for her first novel, *Love Medicine* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston). She is the author of a book of poems, *Jacklight*, also published in 1984 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston. Erdrich was born in North Dakota, and lives in New Hampshire with her husband, Michael Dorris, and their children.
Allan Gurganus's stories have appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, and *The Paris Review*. He teaches at Sarah Lawrence College and lives in New York City. In Rocky Mount, North Carolina, in 1965, he was chosen Kiwanis High School Boy of the Month (November) and received a free dictionary he still uses.
Barry Yourgrau's collection of stories, *A Man Jumps Out of An Airplane*, was published by Sun Press in November, 1984. He is also the author of a previous collection, *The Sadness of Sex*. Yourgrau lives in New York City.

POETRY

Ingeborg Bachmann was born in Austria in 1926 and died in 1973. She is widely considered to be the leading German-language poet of her generation. Her translator, **Mark Anderson**, is a doctoral candidate in Comparative Literature at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. In the group of Bachmann's poems printed in issue #92, the first portion of "Night Flight" was inadvertently omitted; we are happy to print here, with apologies to all concerned, the complete text of Anderson's translation.
Yves Bonnefoy's *Poems 1959–1975*, translated by the American poet **Richard Pevear**, will be published by Random House this spring. Bonnefoy holds the chair of poetics at the Collège de France.
André Breton (1896–1966) was the founder of the surrealist movement. Gal-

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limard is preparing to issue his complete works in a Pléiade edition. Translator **Bill Zavatsky** has published *Theories of Rain and Other Poems* and directs the activities of SUN, a literary publishing company. Translator **Zack Rogow** has a new collection of poems, *A Preview of the Dream*, due from Gull Books later in 1985. He has also translated Max Jacob. In collaboration, the two have completed a translation of *Earthlight* (*Clair de terre*), the first half of Breton's poetic work.

Marilyn Hacker is a former winner of the National Book Award. Her new book, *Assumptions*, will be published this spring by Knopf. She is the editor of the feminist literary magazine *13th Moon*.

Peyton Houston is a poet and businessman who lives in Greenwich, Connecticut. His books include *Sonnet Variations*, *Occasions in a World*, and *Arguments of Idea* (The Jargon Society, 1980).

Denis Johnson's second novel, *Fiskadoro*, will be published this spring by Knopf. He is completing a second volume of poems, which will appear early next year.

Velimir Khlebnikov was, with Vladimir Mayakovsky, the leading exponent of Russian futurist poetry. He died in 1922, at the age of 36. **Paul Schmidt** is translating Khlebnikov's complete works under the auspices of the Dia Art Foundation.

Hugh Seidman's most recent book of poems is *Throne, Falcon, Eye* (Random House, 1982). He lives in New York.

Barbara Wuest is a doctoral candidate in English at the University of California at Irvine. Her poems have appeared in the *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Cincinnati Poetry Review*, and other magazines.

Rachel Hadas was a contributor to issue #94; her contributor's note was inadvertently omitted. Her most recent book is *Slow Transparency*, published in 1983 by Wesleyan University Press. Her study on Frost and Seferis will be published in the spring of 1985 by Associated University Presses. She lives in Manhattan and teaches at Rutgers University, Newark campus.

FEATURE

Roz Chast is the author of two books of cartoons, *Unscientific Americans* (Doubleday) and *Parallel Universes* (Harper and Row). She lives in New York City.

INTERVIEWS

Edward Hirsch is the author of two books of poetry, *For the Sleepwalkers* (Knopf), and *Wild Gratitude*, which Knopf will publish in 1986.

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ART

Gilbert and George began their artistic collaborations in London in 1967. Major exhibitions of their photographic pieces have been held at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, Stedilijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland, and Sonnabend Gallery, New York.

Jack Goldstein was born in Montreal in 1945 and lives in New York. His paintings, drawings and films have been exhibited at Artists Space, New York, Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, and Metro Pictures, New York.

Robert Mapplethorpe was born in New York in 1946 and lives in New York. One-man exhibitions of his photographs have been held at the International Center of Photography, New York, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Contemporary Arts Center, New Orleans, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, and Robert Miller Gallery, New York.

Richard Prince was born in the Panama Canal Zone in 1949 and lives in New York and Los Angeles. His photographic works, appropriated from advertising, magazines, and publicity stills, have been shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, and Baskerville and Watson Gallery, New York.

The Paris Review is pleased to announce the following:

✳ **Norman Rush**'s "Instruments of Seduction," which originally appeared in issue 93 of this magazine and was the 1984 Aga Khan Fiction Prize Winner, and **E.L. Doctorow**'s "The Leather Man," which originally appeared in issue 92, have been selected for The Best American Short Stories 1985 collection.

✳ **Michael Covino**'s "Monologue of the Movie Mogul," which appeared in issue 94, has been selected for the 1985 Editor's Choice short story collection.

✳ **Susan Welch** is the winner of a 1985 Mid-West Voices Fiction Award for her story "The Time, The Place, The Loved One," which appeared in issue 83. The Mid-West Voices Award is a Poets and Writers, Inc. project, supported by the Jerome Foundation of St. Paul.

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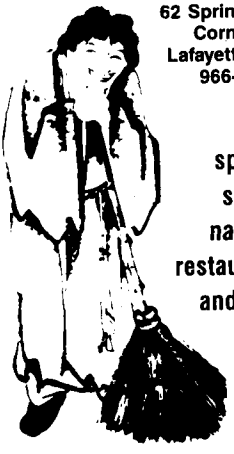

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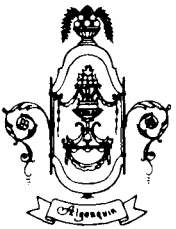

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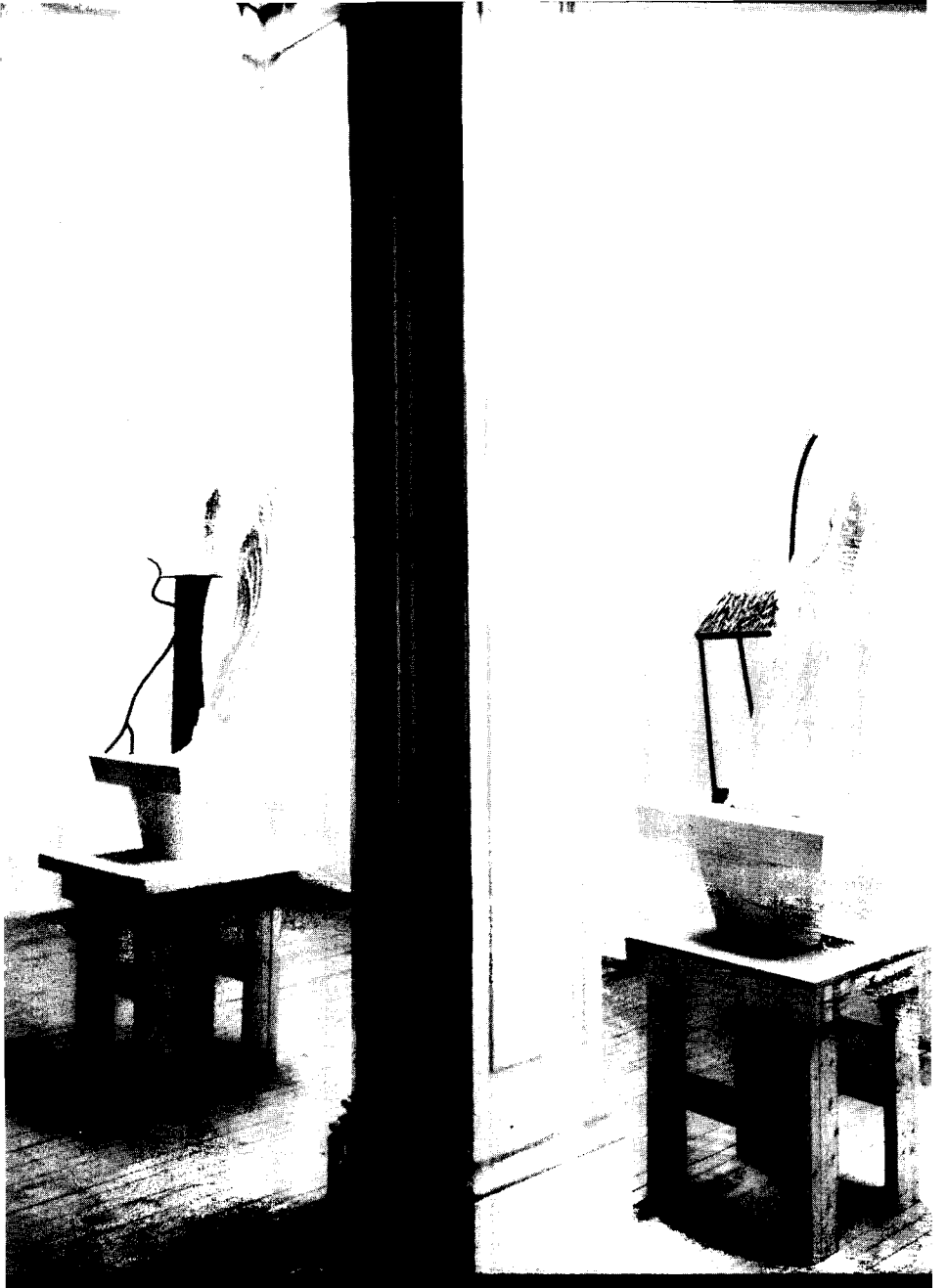

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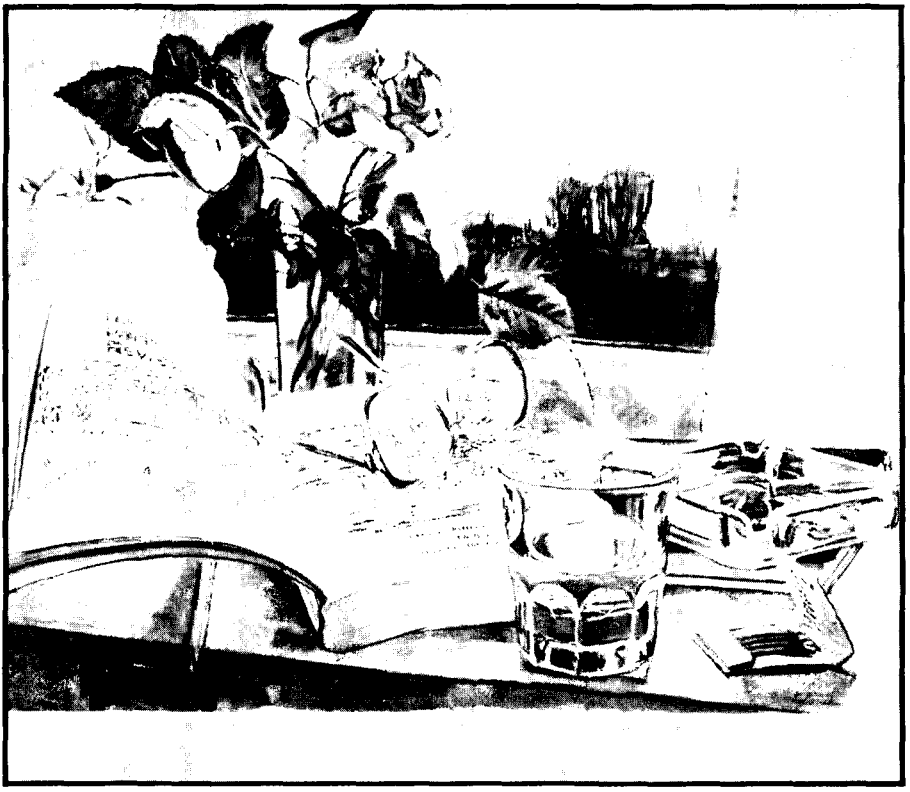

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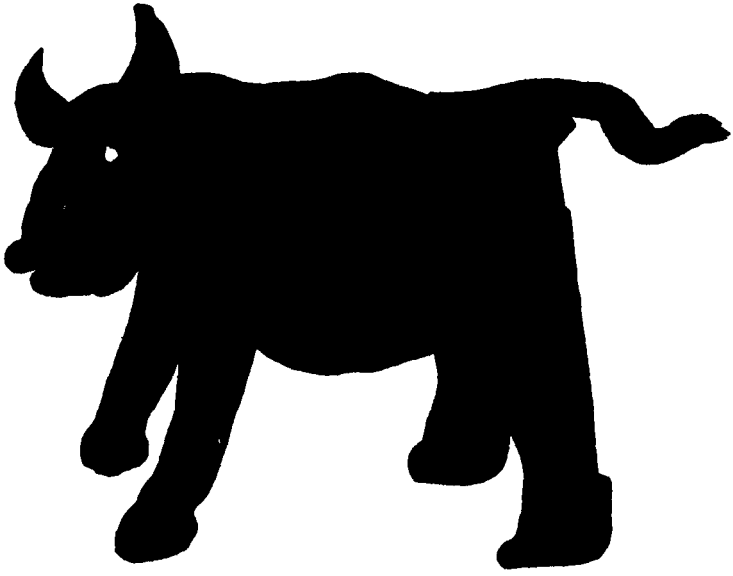

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Art, theatre, living—they are all linked. War Resisters League isn't free of bureaucrats. But they have fewer of them.

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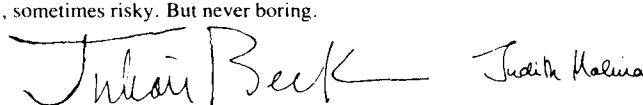

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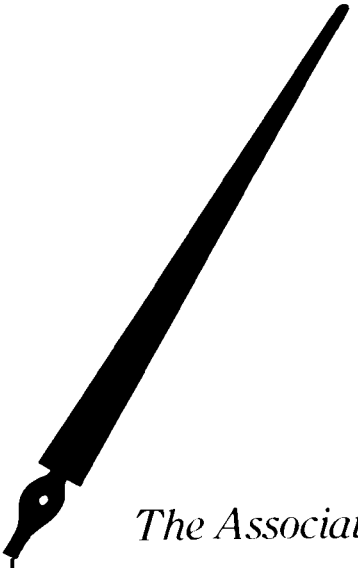

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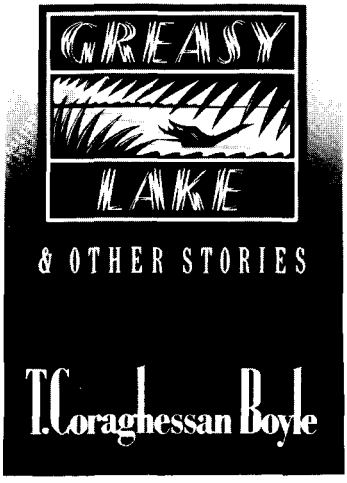

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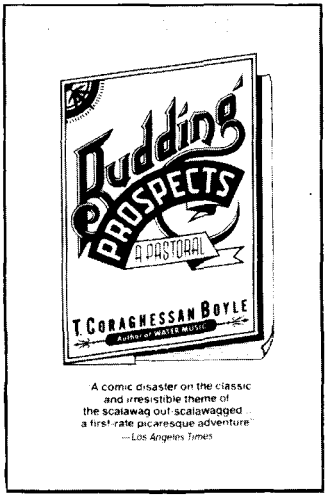
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